

WARMTH OF YOUR HANDS

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Mariya's double 2s or dead girl Yulia Zaitseva

May day rustles poplar tree crowns behind the window, blooming cherries shine in white. Cars with flashy windows rush through the thickness of the foliage along an invisible road. Freeborne sparrows chirp merrily outside of the school's imprisonment. Colored washing dries up on the balcony of an opposite standing apartment building.

While watching out of the window Mariya missed the moment when everybody opened their notebooks and started solving the task. She has to make a thoughtful face so Antonina Romanovna wouldn't get an idea that Mariya is daydreaming in her geometry lesson. Mariya peeks to the side and sees that her desk neighbour Nadya Maslova is preparing to solve the task, she opened her notebook on a blank page, flattened its spine with her nail, placed her eraser at a measured distance from the sheet's edge, and is now picking a space for her future drawing while slowly moving her transparent ruler on the checkered paper. Nadya isn't worried at all because she knows the tasks' setting but she isn't occupied yet about the ways to solve it. Besides, Nadya has been called to the blackboard on the lesson before the last one and there is almost no chance for that to happen today as well. Mariya opens her notebook, flips through the unfinished homework and takes the ruler in her hand.

To picture Mariya would not be hard at all: she doesn't stand out among her peers with anything special, she is moderately slim, only that her face is somewhat roundish and her eyes are pretty big. That makes her similar to American cartoon girls with

wasp waists and long eyelashes, although Mariya's eyelashes aren't that long, but her dark chestnut hair stretches down to her shoulder blades, fixed by the sides with horizontal clips. Now, as Mariya makes her smart-face, she is terribly cute.

- What number? - Mariya asks Nadya in a whisper.
- Hundred eighty third, - whispers Nadya, while focusing on the blank sheet, its checkers appear blurry through the body of the ruler, losing their manufactured parallelism.

Mariya reads the assignment in her textbook. Now it's clear to her that she has to draw a triangle with a median first. The triangle comes out easily and she draws the median by the eye but she can't figure out what to do next. For her, solving mathematical tasks appears to be a wonder inexplicable by the laws of logic, and those rules that solvers use to justify it - pure deceit like circus tricks. Mariya can not imagine whatsoever how such things come to someone's mind.

Mariya hasn't been called out for a long time and she feels as greenish eyes of Antonina Romanovna drill her bent over the notebook face. Tense silence fills the classroom's space, it consists out of schoolchildrens' breath, notebooks' rustle and pencils that clack on deskstops. Mariya looks into Nadya's notebook but she's still drawing her triangle and Mariya has to shift a bit to the side so she can carefully look from behind the shoulder into the notebook of Lena Astahova, a 5-grader¹ that sits in front of her. Incomprehensible letters have already grown all around her drawing, every vertex of the triangle and every point that she, snatched out of

¹ Four-point grading system that is used in Russia, 2 being the worst and 5 being the best.

intangible space by her clear pencil lines, has received a correct name, which do not at all contradict each other in their brevity and together strike with their appropriateness and completeness. And then Antonina Romanovna snaps open the classbook, its cover knocks on the yellow varnished tabletop.

Mariya breaks out in a sweat. She hectically copies Astahova's letters till she blocks the visibility with her elbow, already starting to write down a solution under the drawing. She writes continuously, then holds her hand for a moment to think and Mariya can't see anything. Antonina Romanovna takes notes in the classbook but Mariya already knows - she is about to get called out to solve the task on the blackboard. Stuffy air makes her dizzy, the pencil constantly slips out of her moist fingers, a light tremble runs through Mariya, her fear of inevitable disgrace at the blackboard, her tiny hope for yet somebody else to be called out.

- Sinitsyna! - the teacher shouts out sharply while leaning back in her squeaky chair, and Mariya's soul drops down through her feet somewhere into the floor, and down it drops ever lower into the cold depths of horror.

Mariya grabs at the edge of her desk and stands up, squeezing in her hand the useless notebook she walks down to the blackboard. She treads not particularly firm but her pale face looks straight at the approaching black surface of the board with stains of poorly cleaned chalk on it, and her heart pounds desperately in the chest. Mariya takes a chalk piece from a little shelf underneath the blackboard. Her hand is shaking.

- In color please! - yells Antonina Romanovna, it's not that she is angry, she just has this type of voice.

Mariya takes a piece of green chalk and hopelessly looks at the face of the teacher, still young but already mature, small and not pretty, a bit glossy with cream, with two pink pimples next to the mouth and its pale-painted lips. Then she quickly turns to the board, chalks three thick dots on it and begins to connect them with lines into a triangle pressing it so hard that little smeary scales of dust drop down from the chalk piece. Mariya's weak hand lacks required firmness and one of the triangle sides turns out crooked so she has to erase half of it with a wet rag and draw anew. Mariya's only hope now comes down to the strange being of Antonina Romanovna that can perhaps split the task into several steps and Mariya's part is only the first, preparatory one. But after finishing with her work and taking a look at the teacher she understands - there is no hope at all.

- Go on, go on! - says Antonina Romanovna impatiently tapping her ruler, that substitutes for a pointer, on the desk.

The first wish of Mariya is to ask permission to go to the toilet, but it's so silly and useless that she declines it and decides to surrender herself to her fate. She draws with chalk letters she copied from Lena and stares at them in blank, slightly frowning with her eyebrows. Measured in ruler taps, silence becomes unbearable. Mariya discreetly wipes the sweaty fingers of her chalk-free hand on her dress and prepares for the worst.

- Draw a median in red, - orders Antonina Romanovna.

Mariya obediently finds a piece of red chalk on the shelf and draws a median. It appears to her as a long centipede made by magic out of reddish copper, tarnished like a used nickel, but its exuberant shining still manages to pierce through the surface.

- What is to be done now? - tiredly asks the teacher. - What thing first?

But Mariya doesn't know neither what to do first nor later. She stares at the red line that cuts through the black matter of the board in its bloody precision and dull hopelessness paralyses her, setting up only a handful of Mariya's thoughts on a quickly spinning colored wooden disc.

- Area, - she hears Nadya's muffled voice.
- To find the area, - mechanically says Mariya.
- The area of what? - warily asks Antonina Romanovna, she stands up and walks to the window.
- Of the triangle, - answers Mariya. Of what else indeed?
- Correct, - agrees the teacher while looking out of the window at the chirping greenery. - Write it down.

Mariya helplessly looks back at Nadya.

- $S = \frac{a^2}{2}$ equals a times ash divided by two, - whispers Nadya covering her mouth with her hand.

It comes out very quietly but Mariya's sharp ears accurately separate the formula from the rustling, tapping and jolly murmur of the classroom. Mariya writes it down, straining all her force for a moment to recall how one writes the letter "ash". She manages to do that but there's no time to rejoice,

because Antonina Romanovna splits away from the window and takes a step towards the blackboard.

- Why "ash"? Where do you have "ash"? - strictly asks she and Mariya turns red, shivering like an autumn leaf. - What is "ash"? - she stands right next to Mariya and Nadya doesn't dare to help out.
- Dummy, - distinctively whispers Lena Astahova. - So stupid.

Mariya's lips purse and twitch, holding back her cry. All her forces are now focused on not letting the tears roll down from her eyes, because that would be an unimaginable disgrace.

- What is "ash"? - repeats Antonina Romanovna once again while looking at Mariya's face.
- A median - timidly answers Mariya using her last chance.
- Go back to your seat, you get 2. - Antonina Romanovna bends down to the classbook and puts a 2 in it.

Mariya walks back to her place, in all her might she fights the sobbing that crams her face. She barely sees a pathway between the desks because her eyes are so filled with tears. She takes her diary from the desk side and carries it to Antonina Romanovna, she tries to open it on her way but can't find the right page. The teacher expertly turns over the pages and puts her beautiful signature right next to the elegant 2.

- So why don't you study, Sinitsyna? Bring me your homework.
- I forgot my homework notebook, - Mariya squeezes out the words, she can hardly speak without breaking in tears.

Antonina Romanovna puts a second 2, just like the first one, into a previous day field. Mariya wipes out collected tears with her hand. She didn't forget the notebook but lied, because she only managed to solve two tasks out of five. Now everything turned out even worse.

- How can one be so dull, Sinitsyna? - sighs Antonina Romanovna. - A hundred times I explained the area formula and we went over "height" already in the last year. Maybe you better go to a special school for stupid children? They still learn the multiplication table there.

Laughter rolls through the classroom.

- Go ask her, maybe she doesn't know the multiplication table either, - quietly, albeit so that everybody can hear her, says 3-grader Vika Lihovtseva.
- How much is seven times eight? - loudly asks Volodya Popov.
- And aren't you curious, Popov? - snaps Nadya in support of Mariya.
- Yes, actually it would be curious to find out, Sinitsyna, - says Antonina Romanovna. - If indeed you can recall the multiplication table. Write it down for us on the left part of the board, every row in a different color.

Mariya wipes her tears once again and hobbles to execute this humiliating task.

- I said on the left part, Sinitsyna, turns out that you can't differ left and right either, - Antonina Romanovna throws up her hands. - You definitely must go to a special school. I'll talk to your parents.

The multiplication table of Mariya comes out all skewed, in addition the numbers grow larger towards the downside of it so for three times she has to erase a few rows and start again. Gena Pestov is the next one to be called out to solve the task, in the end he gets 5 because he solves two tasks in a row, but the whole class pays them no attention, staring at Mariya's table instead. Finished with her tortuous work, smeared with colored chalk all over her dress, hair and the face she has been trying to wipe clean all along, Mariya is waiting for permission to finally return to her place. As she walks between the desks Lena Astahova suddenly points her finger at the board and shouts:

- She got it wrong!

Among the roaring laughter Mariya's heart stops and stings so very hard, as if somebody stuck a gypsy needle into it. She turns around in cold sweat and gazes over the rows of numbers written down on the blackboard, from this distance they appear so clumsy, silly and alien, as if they were written by someone entirely else instead of Mariya.

- There, seven times nine - sixty five! - joyfully states Lena.

- It's not a five, it's a three, - moans Mariya in protest while clenching her chalked fingers. - Just that three came out badly.

- Sit down, Sinitsyna, - dryly cuts off Antonina Romanovna. - You don't know even the simplest things. You don't do the homework. If you won't study - you'll grow up a total dummy. If in the seventh grade you don't know what is height and how much is seven times nine - pardon me, you should stay on for a second year.

Mariya can't hold it anymore. Tears stream down her cheeks. She takes a few steps to her desk, sits down, closes her face with her hands and howls in cry.

- Sinitsyna, please get out and howl outside, - says Antonina Romanovna in a few minutes. - You're disturbing the lesson.

Mariya stands up and leaves the classroom staggering and crying, she clumsily closes the door that slams behind her with its lock. She leans with her back against the wall of the corridor, shivers and writhes in the convulsive crying. The classroom's door opens again.

- Sinitsyna, get back and shut the door quietly, - displeased voice of Antonina Romanovna sounds next to her.
- I don't want tooooo, - wails Mariya, disaster suppressed her obedience towards the merciless will of grown ups. - You studied well so you shut it yourself.
- You will not give me lip, Sinitsyna - confidently predicts Antonina Romanovna, she presses the door shut and spansks with her hand against the head of Mariya who shrivels from the strike.
- I'll tell everything to your father, - continues Antonina Romanovna. - I'm too damn tired fighting against you, your boorishness and your laziness.
- Don't tell him, - quietly whispers Mariya with her breaking voice. - I'll study well, I'll do all the homeworks, just don't tell him.
- Oh I'll tell him, - calmly repeats Antonina Romanovna. - If you're afraid of him - I'll definitely tell him everything.

Mariya pulls her hair away from the mouth of her reddened tear-stained face and dries her eyes with

the back of her wrist. Then she kneels down before the teacher.

- Please, - quietly asks she, - don't tell him, he will beat me.
- Get up, Sinitsyna, - strictly says Antonina Romanovna. - I know that you tear pages out of your diary. You had enough time to apply yourself. I'll call your father first thing today.
- Please, Antonina Romanovna, - beggingly whispers Mariya. - For the last time.
- No last times. That's it. My patience is finished. You'll beg your father and not me.
- Please, Antonina Romanovna, I promise to you, I give you my honest word, for the last time, honest-honest word... - Mariya grabs Antonina Romanovna's dress while looking at her narrow black shoes with plaques that look blurry in Mariya's eyes behind the haze of new tears, she lifts her head up and tries to distinguish in this haze the teacher's face.
- Let go of the dress, - harshly answers Antonina Romanovna fighting the strong sadistic desire to kick the girl with her knee to the face. - Let go, scum. - Such a punisher's grit comes through her voice that Mariya unclenches her fingers in horror and merely looks at Antonina Romanovna with her eyes full of tears.

Antonina Romanovna turns around and walks back into the classroom, gently closing the door behind herself. She sits down behind her desk, glances over the class and contemplates if somebody could hear her conversation behind the door. Antonina Romanovna feels very excited and because the children that sit

behind their desks can not understand that excitement - it grows even stronger. In her memory Antonina Romanovna rewinds a few times that slap she gave to Mariya and she imagines how the girl's father will beat her, cruel and in force, perhaps till the blood. He probably beats her often if she is so afraid of him. Antonina Romanovna had a five year old son but she never beat him, the sheer thought of hitting him appeared blasphemous. However, that someone else's dumb girl is a completely different matter. That particular fact of the girl being not her own delivered Antonina Romanovna from the pity that could overcome the sadistic pleasure, and the fact her being dumb conveyed false and twisted justification to the beating, dumb ones must be beaten up. While explaining a new theorem at the blackboard, Antonina Romanovna even regretted that she hit Mariya so poorly, she should have hit her on the hands, on the head, she would have gotten away with it anyhow, the girl gets beaten up on the regular basis, she already got used to it. For sure now she is standing behind the door, wiping up her tears and waiting to pick up her notebooks. How about to get out, as if going on some business, and give her one more, better right on her mug.

After finishing the explanation Antonina Romanovna gives the class another task and carefully sneaks out into the corridor, like a hunter that stalks its prey. But there is no Mariya in the corridor and Antonina Romanovna walks to the toilets in hope to find her there washing her cry-swollen face. But there is no Mariya in the toilet either, only flies beat themselves against the dirty window over dried up bodies of their kin who already fell into the

timelessness of the other life. Antonina Romanovna clenches her fists in anger and quietly swears with a word nobody ever heard from her. She thinks with hatred how long it might be again before she gets another chance to beat up someone's dumb daughter.

Search pattern of Antonina Romanovna reveals her to be a poor scholar of child psychology because Mariya would have never gone into the toilet on the same floor as the classroom, any girl that witnessed her disgrace could stumble upon her there and Mariya didn't want to see anybody at all, she had to wait until the end of the lesson, pick up her backpack and leave. She didn't even think to go to the last Russian language lesson which would have been filled with insufferable shame for her, such shame she felt for example when Gena Pestov caught her off guard in the dressing room's narrow corridor and began to grope her, pressing her with his strong body against the wall, and Mariya couldn't even scream, and even if she could she would not out of that exact shame that burned her soul. Gena continued to grope her for a long time, he couldn't get enough, he even kissed Mariya on the cheek with his sticky lips, he probably had a jam puff before, Mariya tried to break free in silence pushing him away with her hands and shameful tremble washed over her like sprinkles of cold water, every moment it appeared she can not bear it anymore, but unbearable reality lasted on and on like a nightmare with no chance to wake up. Finally somebody started walking down the stairs to the dressing room and Gena left Mariya, sneaking away into stuffy shadows of hanging clothes, and yet she couldn't come to senses for a while, up until her home she felt marks of Gena's fingers on her body and that painful

shiver as if infernal air has been entering her already there, while still being on earth.

After washing her face in the toilet one floor below Mariya went through the empty corridor with its pungent putty odor to the window. She is now leaning on the windowsill and looking at the double window to the schoolyard. She doesn't look outside, but at the window itself, at splinters of its peeling white paint, underneath it shows the black wooden frame as if made out of pulverized mud, at mummies of fallen flies, who knows how they got in there, to the vertical world confined between two squares of glass, and never realized until their death that there is no escape. Mariya doesn't think of anything but tears sometimes flow by themselves, out of her eyes down to already undistorted indifferent face, because the inner being of Mariya, the one she can not even define for herself, already senses cruel fate that approaches her from the future, it consists only out of pain and disgrace. It can't express itself with words because it can't talk and only the perpetual coming of tears born in Mariya's eyes incarnates its terror in front of the inevitable.

The school bell is ringing. When its echo has already dissipated in the warm and sunny corridors of school, for a while the silence still reigns in them. Then the uproar begins to rise behind the classrooms' walls, finally at the end of the corridor the door behind Mariya opens and a few elementary pupils rush towards the long-awaited freedom in laughter, adjusting their backpacks and kicking each other on the go. Another door goes open and then another one and soon all the corridor is full of laughter, screams and stomping of running feet. Mariya bides

for a few minutes next to the window and gets upstairs, pupils of another class are already arriving to Antonina Romanovna. Mariya mechanically answers to a greeting of one girl she knows but doesn't dare to raise her red eyes, she quickly packs her things into the backpack. She tackles through the corridor through the still rushing stream of junior pupils that sometimes painfully hit Mariya with their children's elbow or shoulder of stone, finally she gets down to the first floor and into the yard. It's fully warm outside, barely visible tree animals of wind slide through the foliage of chestnuts that grow in front of the school, in the ever-changing world of light, sparrows chirp on the white fence between the grapevines. Mariya turns around the school corner, walks right by the wall and reaches the hole in the fence. She looks around to make sure nobody watches her escape, first she puts outside her backpack then slips out herself and quickly walks along the pavement to the crossing.

Cold terror pierces Mariya when she dives into the cool shadows of her home yard. She thinks about things her father will do to her when he finds out about her 2s. The accursed page of her school diary already rests crumpled in the trash bin of the trolleybus stop. Mariya went into the entryway of the nearby apartment building, put her backpack on the floor and tore it out, pressing the open diary against her belly. But if Antonina Romanovna indeed calls her father just as she promised to... Mariya doesn't want to think about what will happen then, but she still thinks about it and remembers things that happened before. Father will hold a long and calm conversation with her, then he will order her to

kneel with her hands between the knees and then he will hit her on the head and on the face, grabbing her by the hair. It always ends with Mariya wailing and trying to cover herself with her arms and then father puts a pillow on her face so the neighbours would not hear the screams, then he hits her with his double folded belt that leaves bloody stripes on her hands, it hurts, it hurts so bad that she merely curls up on the floor, holds the pillow herself, bites on it and prays for the torment to end, for the next hit to be the last one. Father explains to mother all those things with a strange word "execution" and mother never shows Mariya any pity until she comes in the evening to father when he sits in the living room and tells him that she will try very hard and she will study well, before that happens to any word of Mariya mother tells her she doesn't want to talk to a damn fool.

Mother herself beats Mariya on a rare occasion, mainly when Mariya did wrong and father is not home or he is tired, only once parents beat Mariya together when she broke the vase father gave mother for her birthday. It was two years ago but Mariya still remembered when mother pulled her hair very hard, looked into her eyes and said: "Do this again, you scum? Do this again, you scum?" and then father hit her with his belt all over the body, his face went red and was so scary that it pursued Mariya in her dreams for a while. On that day parents were more horrifying than any animal, they went completely mad, and when Mariya finally laid in bed, shivering and crying in pain, thinking she will die, parents howled back in their room in a strange manner, as if this time father was beating mother with his belt, but

there was no hitting sound or maybe Mariya just went deaf out of long cry and scream.

It's Saturday but Mariya hopes that father is on duty in the hospital and will only be back by tomorrow. Only a miserable part of the sunlight that reigns outside sips through the corner of a dusty window into the darkened hallway Mariya enters, she presses the stiff elevator button color of dried blood and roughened because of match burns. Light inside of the button wouldn't turn on but somewhere underneath the roof the elevator shudders in its lair, shudders, freezes for a second and drops downwards like a blade of a gigantic sky guillotine.

While standing in its dimly lit cabin Mariya stares at the dusty trail of black rubber that separates the shut doors, silly, like a rabbit that watches the man with an axe approaching. Her heart pounds like crazy in her chest as if trying to break out of the body, doomed to insufferable torture. Inside of the elevator there is an ugly stench of tabac and cheap suffocating perfume. Next to the button board someone scratched on the plastic male genitals with a corresponding inscription.

Mariya unlocks the apartment door with her key and finds out on the spot that father's shoes sit on the rug in the hallway underneath the hanger. She passes them by in unsteady steps, holds at the living room entrance and says to father who sits in the armchair with a newspaper:

- Hello, dad.
- Bring me your school diary, - says father without lifting his eyes from the newspaper and Mariya understands that Antonina Romanovna already called him directly from the school. A cold

fountain breaches out in Mariya's head and she almost faints.

- In a second, I'll just change my clothes, - quietly mumbles she and walks into her room, barely understanding where she is and what she was about to do.

In the room she puts her backpack on the floor next to the desk and sits down on the chair. Sweat bursts on Mariya's face. For a moment she gives into hope that father doesn't know anything yet and merely wants to check her diary. He may not notice the torn out page and everything will go smoothly. A sea of despair washes over Mariya, she looks around like a hunted animal as if trying to find in surrounding objects whatever escape they may offer but understanding that her room is just a trap she got into and there is no escape now. Tears appear in her eyes again, she whimpers and presses her shivering hand with bent fingers to her mouth.

- Mariya! - father calls for her.

He wants to grab her by the hair and start the beating. Suddenly she remembers there was a belt that he took out of his trousers laying on the chair next to him. First she paid it no attention but it imprinted in her memory automatically and now surfaced up as a symbol of inevitable punishment that is about to come very soon, in a few minutes.

- Mariya! - shouts father from the room, one can already hear undertones of rage in his voice.

Mariya understands that the more angry he will be the longer he will torture her and she stands up to walk to her punishment. Her whole body shivers as she walks through the corridor touching its walls and holding the diary in her hand.

- I'm coming, dad! - she yells out trying to suppress her tears. But right on the borderline of the torture chamber her fear wins over. - Just a moment, I'll go to the toilet. - says she. Yes, the belt is on the chair. Father looks at her with his merciless tranquility and puts the newspaper to the side. - I'll just go to the toilet, - repeats Mariya holding the diary at her chest.

- Alright, - answer father. - Be quick.

Mariya heads to the toilet door situated next to the entry door and, without realizing what she is doing, she drops the slippers, sticks her feet in the shoes, carefully opens the apartment door and gets out to the staircase. She doesn't shut the door behind her so it wouldn't click with its lock, she rushes downstairs, afraid to mess with the elevator, she runs on and on, jumping over steps she grabs at the railing with one of her hands and holds the diary in the other one, she runs down to the first floor and out to the street, dashes along the wall of the house so nobody could see her from the balcony, turns around the corner, crosses the lawn on the trampled pathway and only then she switches to quick step, looking back and breathing heavily, then she runs across the road and hides herself behind the newspaper kiosk on the trolleybus stop. There, in the cool chestnut shade, she leans with her back against the metal wall of the kiosk painted in blue, plants her feet into no man's land covered with cigarette butts and ice cream wraps, and only then she realizes the consequences of her escape and becomes terrified of them. She imagines how her father is looking for her, he finds the door open, follows her trail. She

carefully peeks from behind the kiosk to another side of the road but father is not there. A plummy woman is standing next to the chestnut with green sprouts of spring onion that stick out of her bag. Mariya knows that all the grown ups are in cahoots with each other and if now her father starts calling for Mariya, that same woman will give her up because there is no mercy in the woman's face either, she belongs to the grown up league and she beats her children just as well.

The trolleybus is still not coming. The sole hope of Mariya is now connected to its red body, crowned with thin rods. She has to get away from here as quickly as possible, it doesn't matter where. Mariya shakes off a shred of spider web that probably got stuck to her dress as she was running down the stairs, wipes her eyes and peeks from behind the kiosk again. She still can't see her father on the other side. Mariya watches a young woman with irregular shaped face and half-lit by the sun who is selling some ice cream to a pair of schoolchildren, she takes it out of a white box with a laughing penguin on its side. Mariya is also very hungry. All of a sudden father walks out of the yard down the pavement. He carefully looks around, searching for Mariya with his eyes, she hides behind the kiosk again and clenches at the plastic cover of her diary until it hurts. She hears the trolleybus, it drives from around the corner with a plangent screech and slows down momentarily in order to pick a right lane on the smoothness of the highway. The woman with the bag is already making her way to the front of the stop but Mariya waits until the last moment and only when she hears the doors slam open to her salvation, she leaves her hideout

and enters the heated stuffiness of the electrical machine, passengers covered in hot sweat sit inside of it and flies bang themselves against its windows, carried against their will along the immeasurable spaces of hunger. Right after she gets in, Mariya bends down pretending a pebble got stuck in her shoe, in truth of course so that father would not spot her through the window of the half empty trolleybus.

Dirty rubbered floor underneath Mariya's feet trembles, the trolleybus takes off, picks up speed, drives through a crossing and only then Mariya climbs up the stiff seat with a torn up back, she presses her knees against the firm surface of the seat in front and begins to think about returning home.

After all there is no other way for her except for the way back, she has nowhere to live. When she returns parents will probably beat her like that time with the vase. Mariya decides to get sick out of hunger on the streets and perhaps then they will finally have mercy, they will finally understand what they did to her, because, even after all the torments, Mariya believes that parents love their children. Once in wintertime she got a flu, then mother didn't go to work and stayed at her bed, she gave Mariya tea with raspberry jam, measured her temperature and sighed, and then in the morning she would touch Mariya's forehead with her lips although she could get infected and sick herself. And father gave her a bicycle for her birthday although she studied poorly and got almost all 3s in her last term.

Reflecting on her martyrdom she decides yet to visit her friend Nadya Maslova first, to have something to eat, because her belly already starts to hurt out of

hunger and she has no money at all. Nadya lives in four stops but when the trolleybus finally approaches her sixteen storage house, Mariya instantly realizes that they will find her at Nadya's right away, certainly father already called Nadya's parents because he knows that Mariya has no other close friends. Therefore Mariya decides to drive three more stops and go to Rita Golubkova, she studies in another school and Mariya knows her from the circle of artistic applique in the pioneer palace she attended last year. Mariya hasn't paid Golubkova a visit since her birthday, since September that is, but she figures that if she all of a sudden comes by Rita, they will at least have dinner.

Mariya gets out of the trolleybus at the square, crimson irises bloom in flower beds around it, as if left behind after the first of may. Wind flies above them lifting up the bumblebees, and in her wander along the narrow tiled pathway among red flowered earth for a few moments Mariya abandons her fear and dives into a carefree dream of the incoming summer, full of the unimaginable freedom of huge holidays.

Mariya's plan failed: Rita isn't home, she went for a music lesson and will only be back by the late evening. Mariya sits down on the bench in the middle of the square underneath the small shadow of a young poplar and tears appear in her eyes once again. But why, why does nobody want her? She sits, wipes her tears and inspects the diary. There are good marks in it as well, for example right at the beginning there is a 5 in drawing, then there is a 4 in Russian literature because Mariya learned by heart a poem, then a 4 in geography then again in drawing... Although for the most part Mariya has 2s and 3s.

Mariya sits in the square and waits for the evening to come, she is getting more and more hungry. She looks in envy at well-fed laughing girls that pass her by from time to time. Then she remembers reading in some book that people can faint out of hunger so she only has to sit still and wait. She imagines as her father gets a call from a hospital, he comes and finds her lying unconscious on the hospital bed, pale faced or maybe even already dead! Then he will finally understand what he has done!

But regardless of how long Mariya waits - the faint is not coming and the feeling of hunger gets torturous. She stands up and walks to the vending machines with sparkling water in hope to find a coin somebody lost next to them. Previously Mariya often found such dirty coins in the soil, moist out of all the water that oozes from the machine, but she never picked them up, and now it came to her mind that if she picks a few of them, she might be able to buy herself a meat pasty. Ill luck it is - there is not a single coin next to the machines. In vain Mariya walks around them peering askew at the mud and, on the way she scares a pigeon that waddles between her feet, busy in his search of invisible crumbs.

- Did you lose something? - asks her a slightly burred voice of an unknown girl with dark-red hair, greenish blouse with no sleeves, worn out jeans and white dusted footwear similar to gymnastic shoes. In her hand she holds a chocolate ice cream on the stick, still half wrapped in the bluish paper with hoarfrost exuding over its pattern. - Did you drop a ring or something?

Mariya dully looks at the girl, same age as herself and almost same height. The girl has light-blue chilly eyes and slightly tanned skin that maybe should be washed more often.

- No, - timidly says Mariya, - I just thought that..
- Want some ice cream?
- Thank you, no, I don't - answers Mariya, instinctively not willing to accept a half eaten ice cream from an unknown girl. Mariya's father is a doctor and he constantly reminded her that unknown people may give you germs.
- Here, have a bite, it's tasty, - the girl extends her naked hand with the ice cream to Mariya. Mariya feels awkward to refuse it and she bites on the ice cream in the girl's hand. Soft chocolate crust cracks on her teeth and, covered with its fractured shards, a frosty piece of magnificent melting sweetness slides into Mariya's mouth.
- So do you live around here? - asks the girl.
- No, in eight trolleybus stops in that way, - Mariya points with her arm in the direction of her home. - On Korolev street, - she wants to give the ice cream back.
- You can finish it if you want, I'll buy me another one. Let's cross the road and go sit on the bench in the park there.

They head on in the direction of tree crones that gleam in green among the dust and exhaust of the bypassing cars.

- And where do you live? - asks Mariya, somewhat twisting the words because of the ice cream piece she warms up in her mouth despite the toothache.

- Not far from here. I was bored and I decided to go out. I often do it like that, just board the bus and drive off aimlessly, then I change to another one and then another one. What's your name?
- Mariya.
- And my name is Yulia Zaitseva. Why do you wear a school uniform? It's not the ring that you lost but probably the keys.

Mariya lowers her eyes and bites on the ice cream again. First she doesn't want to tell Yulia about her fate but then she imagines going back home and feels so scared and unbearably lonely that she doesn't mind appearing ridiculous in her explanation anymore, just be it for someone to know about her misfortunes.

- I left home, - confesses Mariya, she lifts her eyes up and awkwardly smiles. Suddenly a word gets born in her soul, without being spoken yet, it already grabs Mariya with its terrifying infinity, like the wind that grabs a little field butterfly. - Forever.
- How come? - Yulia's face looks slightly tired as if some torment of the imminent fate gnaws at her as well. She brushes curls out of her face and looks back at the traffic light. A truck drives by right in front of their faces and envelopes them in its intoxicating gasoline fumes.

Mariya doesn't know what to answer. She is ashamed to tell about her beatings, ashamed about her 2s, besides all those things can't explain at all that very word she just pronounced barely realizing what it means. She feels as the pinchy heaviness rises in her throat again. Mariya's vision gets foggy with tears. She bites off another piece of ice cream with

her wooden mouth. A tear drops on the asphalt next to the tip of her shoe. Mariya turns as if she spotted something at the side but actually she just doesn't want Yulia to see her silly howl. A golden beam of traffic light blurs in her eyes and splits into two rays like two ribbons.

- Let's go, - it is difficult for her to speak. -
It's yellow.

So they enter the park, huge trees rise to the sunny skies, grass breathes with shadowy moisture, jasmine bushes shine in white between the trunks and one can already feel approaching evening in its sealed warmth. They walk along the straight alleyway for a long time towards the strolling people, Mariya eats the ice cream, Yulia simply thinks about something with her fingers stuck in the jeans pockets.

- I'm afraid to go back, - finally says Mariya.
- Don't go back, - offers Yulia after giving it a thought.
- Easy for you to tell, you have a place to live and where will I live? On the street?
- You can live in my place. There's enough room.
- But I can't live with you all the time.
- Why not?
- My parents will probably search me with the police.
- They won't find you.
- And what will your parents say?
- They left. They aren't there anymore.

Mariya looks at Yulia in mistrust.

- So who do you live with? - asks she.
- I live alone.

- Oh, - Mariya is surprised. Then her face saddens again. - But if I live with you I can't go to school anymore.
- Well then don't, - smiles Yulia. Mariya notices for the first time how she smiles, somewhat uncertain and sad. - For example I don't go there. Since long ago.
- What, you don't go there at all?
- At all.
- And they think that you're sick?
- They think that I died.

Star mill

- How do you mean "died"? - Mariya doesn't believe in it, out of surprise she even stops biting the ice cream.
- Easily. That I got hit by a car.

Mariya ponders.

- You better not tell anybody, - continues Yulia, for some reason she looks upwards, towards the tree crones.

Mariya looks there as well and sees white wings of clouds enveloped in stork feathers of the unfathomable mystery. When everybody thinks you are dead there is no need to go to school, you can do what you want. Mariya remembers her dying grandmother and her funeral, her body being carried in the casket on the street along the houses, white chestnut petals falling, brass music playing, aunt Anna carrying a pillow with grandmother's Labour Orders. Is it possible that grandmother was alive as well and she is now hiding somewhere behind the old brick walls of the houses? Grandmother loved her so much, already very sick she asked Mariya to come by and told her different strange things that Mariya couldn't understand because the disease had distorted grandmother's voice, nevertheless she listened closely and confirmed, she had pity for this old dying creature that loved her unconditionally.

- Did you have a funeral?
- No. Not me. The car... it smashed that girl's face and they thought it's me. She had the same dress,
 - Yulia sighs. - First I thought about living by myself for a bit and come back home later, but

when I wanted to return - my parents already moved away, I don't know where.

- Do you love your parents?
- Yes. They're great, always gave me presents.
- And my father beat me, - Mariya speaks with an effort, tears begin to choke her again. - Hard.
- That's why you ran away?

Mariya nods. She follows Yulia around the corner to the side alleyway, even more shadowy and with dandelions sprinkled over its lawn. They walk along the alleyway in silence until the convulsions let Mariya off, she wipes her tears and throws away the ice cream wrapper into the trash bin next to the green bench. Here they make a stop.

- He'll kill me if I return, - quietly says Mariya.
- He'll simply kill me.
- Don't be afraid, - says Yulia. - Let's go to my place, they probably started to search for you already. And in your school uniform they'll find you right away. I'll give you some clothes, I have the same size. The important thing is to wait it out for a few days then they'll think you've died too and quit searching.
- But there'll be no car accident for me.
- But you can get kidnapped and killed, can't you?
- By whom?
- Some evil guy who tortures and chokes little girls. Some sort of Ded Moroz that eats little Snegurochka's, om-nom-nom.

Mariya stares at Yulia expecting to see her smile but Yulia looks upwards, into darkening basins of tree canopies.

They don't talk until they reach Yulia's home on another side of the park, two blocks away, surrounded

by acacias that grow in its yard. They walked pretty quick and only made a stop at the grocery store, Yulia bought two chocolate bars and a carton of milk there. She took some money out of her jeans pocket, crumpled up but not filthy.

The house where Yulia lives is built out of old yellow bricks, its staircase is humid and spacious, nobody tried to save room during the construction and between the stairs there is a square gap enough for two elevators of Mariya's house, but there is no elevator here whatsoever. Railings along the staircase are bulky, made out of brown wood and polished by multiple generations of old people, most of them have already died because since the last renovation there were no new children born in the house. In the staircase dome girls' shoes wake an echo that batters loudly on the steps and flies upwards to the little window in the rooftop, the sunlight streams right through it, half-blinded by the dust.

They ascend higher and higher, until the last floor, Mariya is already scared to look at the gap, for her it's indeed strange that death is always so very close to humans in this house. On the last floor beside two apartments there is also a wire mesh door with a broken padlock and a stairs behind it that leads to an unpadded rusty door. Yulia walks up the stairs, from underneath the blouse she takes out a key that was hanging around her neck. The whole area in front of that last door is covered in metal and wooden junk and barred with wire mesh on the sides so Mariya can finally take a look at the dark gap, subjected to a mighty geometrical perspective.

- Let's go, - says Yulia.

Mariya turns around and sees a small room behind the rusty door, just like in one of her dreams there are only two objects: an iron staircase and a little window in the ceiling. Yulia locks the door behind Mariya and climbs the stairs, grabbing at its railings with one hand and holding chocolate bars with the milk carton in the other. Mariya climbs behind her and steps onto a roof. It's covered in red tiles, a few steps away from Mariya there is a pipe growing from it. At the girls' sight a sparrow flock breaks from the pipe and flies over to the next one, further away, and one especially fearless sparrow stays on the television antenna. Mariya sits on the window's edge, not daring to stand up, because the roof goes down at an angle, meanwhile Yulia easily walks on the tiles, she passes the pipe and goes to the non-vertical door on the roof. Ashamed to appear cowardly, Mariya bends down, places her hand on the tiles and slowly begins to follow up. Swifts sweep above her in the skies.

Underneath the door lies the attic, dark, pierced with sunbeams and old washing lines, cluttered with boxes and metal junk, Mariya's new home. It's an elongated room with vaulted ceiling reinforced by six pillars, and a door in the opposite wall is bolted shut.

- Here it is, - says Yulia and sits down on the box that shines golden in the sunlight, - my flat. Of course no bathroom and the toilet is outside. Cockroaches, mice. But not too cold, there's a water pipe next by, even a bit too warm in summertime. With a view on the clouds and so on. Will you stay here?
- Yes, - answers Mariya.

- Stay, - says Yulia with a smile and climbs with her feet on the box. - To be honest it's a bit boring here alone.
- Do you live here for a long time? - asks Mariya and sits down on the old cracked chair.
- Since last summer.
- Oh! - says Mariya, thinking that in no way she would be capable of living in the attic alone for such a long time. Plus it would've been way too scary at night. - And nobody comes here?
- That door, - Yulia points at the bolted door, - is locked from the inside and blocked by a canister from the outside. The only way to get in is the one we used. Somebody has a key for the rooftop door but nobody reaches here. In the last resort one can hide there, between the boxes.

They speak and take turns drinking milk from a single cup. Mariya listens to Yulia's beautiful voice, doves cooing in the attic depths and swifts sweeping by, all of it causes sweet longing for the unfolding time. From the rays reflecting on the wall one can watch the sun setting down. It smells like old wood, dirt, sawdust and a bit like dead bodies of flies and mice. Mariya completely quits thinking about her fate and feels good. For a few times she licks her sticky chocolate lips and tells Yulia about her school. Yulia browses her diary, Mariya can describe the face of every mark in it, she recalls times of her studies, her class full of friends she hasn't seen for a long long time.

When it gets dark they take off their shoes and climb out to the roof, lay down on the heated tiles with the sky full of stars above them. Their words cease, just as little by little ceases the water

dripping from the mysterious tap of the past, and soon they simply lie still without talking and look upwards. Mariya thinks about life, it occurs to her as a big black cat that sits in the blooming bushes at night and stares at the world through the distorted prism of its green eyes, it sees the earth, earthworms, sleeping bumblebee nests and breathing birch roots. There is no wind around Mariya so all the trees keep silent, they extinguished their old lanterns, and stars are getting ever brighter, gain depth, so pristine as if cut out of the thinnest silver metal, and if it is indeed so - Mariya even knows their taste, like carnation flowers she tried once, a pleasant taste of inedible iron.

- More of them than leaves on the trees, - whispers Yulia.

A bat zips by the rooftop with a thin squeak. The wall of time around Mariya slowly dissolves and she begins to see the past of frozen trees and living night creatures, it seems exciting and mysterious and even now it's flowing continuously inside her.

- Do you know the star mill? - she's still able to hear Yulia's whisper that vanishes into the shining scatter above and slowly floats back like a burial boat of an Egyptian pharaoh, it moves the dead stone inside its womb and the entirety of existence goes with it, displacing the waters of underworld Nile around. - The star mill?
- What is that? - asks Mariya, but her voice comes from far away and it's so very strange that she gets scared.
- There, above... Look above... - whispers Yulia, or maybe she doesn't and Mariya merely dreams those words on the rooftop of the house sunk into the

May night full of lantern spots and scents of blooming bushes.

Eyes wide, Mariya gazes up but only observes the star sea, the sea of enigmatic light dots made out of otherworldly metal, she doesn't grasp that every single one of them is bigger than anything she saw in life, and she doesn't know that those clusters make out merely a glittery transparent button on the cosmic princess' dress. A vertigo comes upon Mariya, space flux collapses upon her, unrestrained by the wizardry of her little brain anymore, bats freeze in midair, her heart stops beating, she exhales for the last time, her breath holds still and Mariya sees The Star Mill. It turns above Mariya's head, it turns slower than time and stars turn with it, whirl into it, braiding into huge nebulous currents and Mariya realizes right away that she herself is turning as well, dragged along by the unknown force that sucks her into its depth and inside of it lives death.

Mariya wants to scream but she's not alive anymore, falling into the abyss of The Universe, therefore she can't scream but only see and feel the fear, separated from her body and immensely tormenting because of that for there is no escape from it. Mariya is overtaken by the enchanting despair in the beautiful face of death, something pulls her in, spinning and causing intense pain, and with the pain air enters her chest again, burning like fire, and her heart delivers its first beat into her numb body.

She returns back into herself and sees Yulia kneeling down next to her, Yulia looks right into her eyes. Yulia's pale face with moist dark eyes appears scary, Mariya takes a quiet sob and her mouth tenses in an unpleasant grimace. Yulia gives out a short

groan as she lifts Mariya up her feet. Mariya can barely stand, her feet feel no roof tiles underneath, her body floats some way to the side, tree leaves near her face, massive like pillows they gloss dimly in lanterns' light, shadow spots on their surface grow bigger, and sleek black insects run so fast that Mariya can't make out their nature, aren't they just drops of blood that softly spills out of her nostrils.

She doesn't comprehend how she got to the bench next to the house, in the chestnut shadow together with Yulia, however she clearly sees her barefoot legs with folded toes, they align and stretch out from the bench, a white moth slides brashly in the emptiness of night's air low above the asphalt, covered in bright lantern spots so that at times the moth appears to be a tiny hallucination, she sees red lights of a car that drives out to the road behind the bushes, and Yulia who stands by her left side like a tall flower in a vase, veiled by impenetrable shadow. She hardly remembers her obscure path along the chalk alleyways of night, the smell of lilac and nitro paint, as if all the flower beds around would have been painted in it, melodious moans of women sounding out of dark half opened windows, hysterical screams of fighting cats that sound like cries of some undiscovered tropical birds, walls with rugged bricks and mortar strokes in between, sharply outlined by the moon, as if the night painter, that man with strange face and name, drew them with his brush to highlight the death assets in the green chaos of this wildlife.

Yet they come back and Mariya falls asleep, curled up on a tattered mattress in the attic's corner,

unwashed and happy. She sleeps for a long time and wakes up when the sun is already gazing high and car sounds enter through the window. Yulia doesn't sleep and simply lies on her back next to Mariya with her hands behind her head and daydreams about something, birds sing from the trees nearby and a far away woman's voice calls home a child that got lost in the shadowy yards.

Then Yulia hands out to Mariya a pair of faded jeans, torn up at the shin, and a white shirt, they proceed to the sunday market to buy jam puffs and green apples, so sour that tears jump to Mariya's eyes, they eat in the garden next to a fountain, little tree branches and paper ships set by children float on its surface. After that one can spot girls on the swings in the river park, later they sit on the sand by the water playing word games and digging a channel to a small basin, they launch little boats out of tree bark and brave bug warriors from the coastal kingdom sail on them in search of new sandy lands. Then they throw pebbles into the water and out of sand they build a city inhabited by insects, mostly black ants, never in history will its ruins be discovered and desecrated. Then they go to the other side of the park, eat lemon ice cream out of saucers and look at grown ups playing volleyball with their perfectly round white ball, and in the evening they leave the garden and decide to come back tomorrow when all the silly children will be at school, sitting behind their dusty desks, drawing in red page fields in their notebooks and getting their 2s.

Bright red sunset is glowing on the background behind the sparse wall of tall poplars as girls walk the uphill street and enter a cafe named "Seabird",

orange lamps burn inside of it and a thin young woman with foxy facial features and charcoal bow tie under her blouse's collar pours alcohol-scented cocktails into large glasses. Yulia orders some ice cream with an unfamiliar to Mariya french name and while they wait for it behind the table covered in clean tablecloth, Mariya examines dark-green velvet walls, curved chairs, painted landscapes in thin alabaster frames. A slender man in a dark-grey suit approaches them, a mole on his upper lip, something thorny inside his eyes, like a hedgehog, like october forests covered in yellow wet leaves, something alien and horrifying, like pathways that extend into the distance of an autumn evening. The man talks to Yulia in a low voice and Mariya can't distinguish the words, Yulia smiles at him and even makes some unclear gesture with her hand, then the man leaves to the next table, sits down and begins to read a newspaper. He gets served a yellow opaque cocktail and slowly sips it, leaning relaxedly on a curved chair back. Mariya eats french ice cream and the woman with the black bow tie puts on a tape of some new dancing music that Mariya never heard before. Music enchants Mariya to a level she forgets about that strange man in the suit, she feels very much adult, amazing and exciting future pulls on and scares her at the same time, this future is here already, she's inside of it, it'll happen specifically to her, she doesn't know yet what exactly, but it's clearly specifically hers, it'll happen to her body and her soul, to all those familiar and close things that existed for her whole life, all those things she considered her own, intimate and beyond anybody else's reach.

Full of barely distinguishable aromas either of peach or of apricot or maybe of ananas and soaked in bitterish liquor that Mariya often found inside of chocolates on her mother's or father's birthdays, ice cream comes to an end and enchanting music still continues when Yulia says they will go together with the man in the suit she calls "uncle Andrey" to eat some tasty cake. Mariya doesn't want a cake and doesn't want to go together with uncle Andrey but together with Yulia she is less scared, besides she wouldn't manage to find a way out of the unfamiliar district all by herself. She imagines an aunt, a wife of uncle Andrey, a tea party at the table in the kitchen, a cake on it, and asks Yulia if they'll come back to the attic later. Of course, answers Yulia, we'll just make a short visit.

Uncle Andey takes them in a spacious foreign car that smells like roses, one can climb on the broad sofa-like seat and it drives so smooth on the road - it doesn't even shake. Yulia lowers the door window and grey wind blows in their faces and uncle Andrey puts on a tape with some other sort of music Mariya never heard before either, therefore she makes a conclusion of existence of such a huge amount of the unknown music that it takes her breath away.

Uncle Andrey's music fits the car's velocity, blinking trees and burning lanterns, it describes a fantastic world they fly into, bronze trees with needles instead of leaves, windy gardens, the smell of burgundy bushes, a lattice terrace next to a small lake, mountains with clouds stretching all above them, this world Mariya has never seen in live but she imagines it clearly as if she would be asleep and watching a magic dream. She as well exposes her face

to the headwind and shuts her eyes, the joy of freedom overwhelms her, the joy of a mad flight into the unknown, a flight that no one can stop.

Soon after the road gets worse and the car begins to shake on its bumps, the tart smell of field weeds and blooming orchards breaks into the car, electrical charges of fireflies scatter around the wheels, Mariya sees the full moon above the horizon, untainted by the clouds it hangs in the thick dark-azure colored skies and merging tree tops sweep by below it. They slow down, turn off the highway, drive for about hundred meters through the forest and stop next to a white seven storage house surrounded by pines and piles of building sand. The yard is deserted and only a single window of them all is still lit.

In uncle Andrey's flat Mariya takes a shower in a bathroom lined with blue marmor-like tiles, she washes her hair with aromatic shampoo and wraps herself in a white terry towel that covers her only until mid-thigh. Then she sits barefooted with her legs crossed on the sofa in the living room and dries hair with a hot hairdryer. A night lamp shaped like a fly agaric is burning in the room, its window is veiled in thick curtain and tulle fabric, inside a gap between them one can see a lantern outside and a corner of the neighbouring house with the same dark windows. Mariya thinks about what will happen to her clothes now, what does the promised cake look like and for some reason she shakes in uncertainty. Uncle Andrey enters the room in his half-faded bathrobe with white and green stripes and sits down on the sofa next to Mariya. She continues drying her hair with the quietly humming hairdryer, looking at the

gap between the curtains and waiting for Yulia. Uncle Andrey keeps quiet. Then he tells Mariya to turn off the hairdryer to let it cool off for a bit. Mariya obediently turns off the hairdryer, puts it on the armchair next to the sofa, throws her hair behind her back and begins staring at the ceiling.

Suddenly uncle Andrey jumps on her, pushes her down with his heavy weight, presses Mariya's face to his mouth, like a dog he licks her lips and cheek with his hot wet tongue, and with his hand he tears off her towel. Mariya tries to break free, too baffled to scream she is totally terrified, but uncle Andrey is so strong, he appears to be made out of wood, he thrusts her even harder into the sofa, crumples her like a pillow, tears away the towel so hard it burns her skin, Mariya curls up out of shame when he painfully grabs her thighs and kisses her eyes, cheek and nose. Mariya squinches her eyes tight, overwhelmed with terror and unfamiliar rage, between her eyelids she sees Yulia appearing behind uncle Andrey's back, her hair soaking wet. Yulia makes a quick move, Mariya hears a rapid and loud smack as if something heavy hits the floor, uncle Andrey's head painfully hits her on the temple, merry warm splatter fall on Mariya's forehead, uncle Andrey himself awkwardly turns over to his side and begins sliding down to the floor, he holds for a moment, stuck on Mariya's leg he bizarrely jerks his head backwards and tries to cling at the sofa. Then Mariya clearly sees how Yulia using both of her hands swings the meat axe and hits him behind the ear, she can hear a short crackle, uncle Andrey makes a brief moan and continues sliding down with his back to the carpet, then Yulia steps over his leg and takes another

squishing swing, she chops at the same spot blood flows out from. Mariya's head is reeling, she lays with her chest on the sofa's armrest and pukes right on the parquet so severely she almost chokes. Her face is wet out of uncle Andrey's licking and splashed with his blood, it writhes in vomit spasms, her white fingers squeeze at the armrest until it hurts as if Mariya would be hanging above the abyss, afraid to fall down into it.

Finished with puking, Mariya climbs over the armchair and wants to get out to the balcony, she needs some fresh air and perhaps she also seeks to escape the cursed flat by jumping down. Yulia grabs her by the hand and stops her, Mariya breaks free and while halfway turned she sees uncle Andrey lying still on the floor with his head cracked open, a bloodstain is slowly spreading on the carpet under the dim light of the night lamp. She understands that he is dead, dead like that kitten in a puddle of its own intestines the boys from her courtyard dropped from the rooftop down on the asphalt at the house's entrance. She feels nauseous again, dark spots dance in front of her eyes.

- Not to the balcony, - quietly says Yulia. - Someone might see you. Don't be afraid of him, he's dead already.
- Dead? - pronounces Mariya with her stiff lips, tainted in the disgusting aftertaste of vomit.
- Yes, dead-dead, - repeats Yulia. - I smashed his head with the axe. If one hits with an axe to the head - a person dies. Especially if one hits many times. Let's go to the bathroom, you'll wash yourself.

Mariya sits naked on the edge of the bathtub covered with a towel, rinses her mouth and spits out to the cross-barred drain hole. She draws water from the tap with her cupped hands. She's still not well, cold waves brush against the back of her head and she feels nauseous. Yulia washes Mariya's face with her hand, then she wipes splashes of muddy blood from her own legs and cleans the axe under the bath tap. After Mariya spots some clotted pieces of skin and hair getting washed off from it, she stands up, presses her hands against the bathtub, pauses, gives it a short thought, and begins vomiting again.

- Oh, come on! - yells Yulia. - Did you really eat that much today? Get dressed, it's time to go.

Mariya finds her clothes on the washing machine, it's hard to put them on and she wants to vomit all the way through. She buttons up and dully stares at Yulia cleaning the axe at the towel she was just sitting on.

- I want to take it with me, - explains Yulia. - Such a useful thing.

They walk through the dark corridor and Mariya is very afraid that uncle Andrey can appear out of the living room. It's quiet in the flat and only the refrigerator is humming quietly in the kitchen. Maria shivers in horror as she passes by the living room door and yet she takes a peek into it. Uncle Andrey is still lying on the floor but now somewhat differently, not in the same way as before.

- No, don't go! - shrieks Mariya after Yulia takes a step into the room. - He's... moving.

- He's dead alright, - says Yulia with a grimace, she approaches uncle Andrey and kicks him. - See, can't feel anything. You can try yourself.

Mariya is very scared, but mind-blowing curiosity carries her into the room, in small steps, prepared to flee at any moment, she approaches the naked hairy leg, the body in the striped robe lays prone and still on the carpet. Yulia opens the wardrobe, searches through a jacket inside and finds a leather wallet in it. She takes out some banknotes and tucks them into her jeans pocket. Trembling Mariya touches uncle Andrey's leg with her foot and quickly withdraws it because he is warm as if being alive.

- You puked here so gross, - remarks Yulia while pointing at the puddle next to the sofa. - Yuck.
- You really killed him, - says Mariya, she backs off to the door to keep a safe distance from the corpse because she still can't believe a human can be killed just like that.
- Yes I did. Do you know what he wanted to do to you? No you don't. He wanted to do such an awful thing you can't even imagine. It would've been very painful and very nasty. Go to the corridor.

Mariya gets out to the corridor, turns around and sees Yulia squatting next to the corpse, she does something to it with her hands and sharply jerks her elbow backwards. Something ugly and scary.

Skies are already completely black as they walk out of the house. They walk along the road that leads them through sand dunes and uncut forest to the highway. Yulia carries the axe in a bag with her. Crickets are chirping loudly around them and field weeds smell thick as smoke. They take a turn and get out to the highway through the forest. They walk in silence for a while, along the highway through the waves of dust and stinky carbon monoxide of cars rushing past them. Mariya already can't completely

believe in the death of uncle Andrey, but a foul shiver is still biting at her slightly, as if in the autumn when all the insects have already died off and turned to dust, and some tiny flies, that have no need in sun warmth but merely in the smallest pearls of blood, are swarming in the air all around her.

They keep quiet inside the bus, standing in a passage between the seats, Mariya feels motion sick and nauseous because of the heavy gasoline smell, she sits down right to the dirty floor to avoid puking again. Some woman begins to scold her, thinking she smoked some stirring plants to explore heaven while still on earth, but Mariya pays her no attention, she is solely concentrated on her fight against the vomit spasms. Then they sit at some extremely filthy bus stop, its walls covered in obscene drawings and swear words, it smells acidic of dried urine mixed with soaked and charred cigarette butts. Mariya looks at her hands folded on her knees and they appear strange to her, perhaps because they are barely visible in the yellow light of a blinking lantern. Yulia sits next to her on the bench, legs stretched out, a bag with the axe by her side. Far away behind the treeline glow the highrises' lights of some new gigantic city districts, the existence of which stayed unknown to Mariya until this moment, gradually it gets clear to her just how large this world is, the world she inhabits, and how many alien unfamiliar lives inhabit her hometown with her, like fishes and seashells in the ocean.

The moment Mariya makes it to the mattress in the attic, she dives into a half-blind dream filled with sounds of ever-moving trains and blinking of bypassing lanterns, rusty railway stations, bonfires

in the night fields and uncle Andrey's bodies, every single one different from another, they are spread around so casually and openly, soon she loses all the interest in them. She wakes up in the middle of the night, dawn is closing in slowly, she keeps laying with her hands behind the head, absent of memories she listens to mice rustling in the attic darkness and to steady breathing of Yulia who is sleeping with her face buried in Mariya's shoulder. Then she falls asleep again and this time she has a nightmare about uncle Andrey, his head cracked open when he presses her down into the sofa with his heavy corpse and licks her face, blood flows out of his wound on Mariya's clothes, she barely manages to break free but he catches her again and again and continues licking her face smiling, silly and insistent like a dog and Mariya understands that all of it is happening because he is dead. Mariya wakes up in cold sweat when something resembling a big slug starts crawling out of his cracked head, but he doesn't notice it at all, he keeps smiling and begins shaking his head and moaning as if trying to remember the moment of his death, his face gets creepy as if instead of a human he would be some sort of an animal-human crossbreed. Yulia's sleeping breath calms Mariya down but she is still afraid to fall asleep again, the fear stops only at dawn and a simple colorless dream descends upon her.

Mariya wakes up in the middle of a hot day and looks at the dust floating inside the light pillars in the attic, she hears wild chirp of birds on the trees outside and understands that the weekday has come. School lessons have already started and she can imagine things that happen in that life she has

abandoned, for a moment she even wants to get back there and sit in a stuffy classroom, write something in her notebook and quit thinking about tomorrow because tomorrow will probably be the same as today, but as she imagines the slow flow of the lesson packed with fear and sleepiness, Mariya begins to rejoice for being here instead, in a place where nobody makes her to sit still behind the desk and stare at the textbook and she can simply lie down with her hands behind the head, think about whatever she wants and do nothing. Around midday she peeks out to the roof in hope of finding there Yulia, but she is not there and Mariya gets scared that the police arrested Yulia for the murder of uncle Andrey and she is now on her own and she'll have to get back home, such thought causes an attack of revolting terror inside her. Finally, when Yulia climbs out to the roof carrying a net bag with a bottle of milk, a loaf of bread and some other food, Mariya celebrates and walks towards her on the tilted surface of the rooftop, maintaining balance with both of her hands. For dinner they use a knife to smear some butter on the bread and eat it while sipping on cold milk, Mariya even laughs at something Yulia says but when she offers her to go for a walk Mariya declines, pretending to have a headache, in truth she is simply afraid to go outside.

In such manner two days pass by, during this time Mariya doesn't want to leave the roof, Yulia goes out to buy some food and for the rest of the time they play cards, talk about the past and when it gets dark they sit on the rooftop, watch the streetlights and guess about ways of life inside of the neighbouring houses' windows. Every so often Mariya tries to speak

about the police but Yulia ignores her and continues talking about other things.

On Tuesday night Mariya dreams about fighting off policemen that try to climb up the roof, they manage to trick the girls, throw over a bridge from another roof and flank them, they grab Mariya, tie her hands behind her back and sentence to death by pushing her off the rooftop down to the asphalt. They lift her up by the shoulders and she sees a grey cat peacefully passing by the spot of her horrible death down there, a warm summer street is completely desolated and one of the policemen loudly whispers right in her ear: "Wanna fly, girl?". Mariya screams and begs not to be thrown, that she'll confess to everything, that Yulia has murdered uncle Andrey and she had nothing to do with that at all, but policemen let her go and she flies, windows of the opposite standing house race upwards and the wind blows in her ears with ever growing force, parallel to her increasing terror. The impact happens with a loud crackling sound, Mariya wakes up in the dark and feels right away that she is alone. She runs her hand over the mattress, it still keeps the remains of Yulia's warmth. Then Mariya recalls spotting a movement next to the rooftop door as she woke up. She jumps up, sneaks to the door and takes a peek outside. There is nobody out there but in the night silence filled with star murmur she hears a short and barely audible sound of the door slamming against its frame somewhere underneath the rooftop. Mariya doesn't understand where did Yulia go, she gets scared but even more she doesn't want to stay alone now so she gets through the door down to the staircase. She hears Yulia's steps running down the stairs in complete darkness. Mariya heads down as

well, she holds at the railing, not daring to run because she can't see the steps at all. She walks down two stair flights when she hears the entrance door shutting behind Yulia with a squeak.

After a painful struggle with darkness and all the steps it conceals, steps that stretch in curves under her feet as if they would be inner keys of a gigantic music box with no exit, Mariya runs out to the street and the asphalt stings painfully at her bare feet. Yulia moves rapidly somewhere far ahead, disappearing and reappearing in the lanterns' light spots. Mariya runs behind her along the short-cropped lawn stripe with chestnut trees growing out of it. At about fifty meters from Yulia she changes pace and continues walking, she tries to stay behind the trunks in case Yulia decides to take a look behind. But Yulia doesn't look behind and simply walks further, she crosses empty streets illuminated in blinking yellow coloration of traffic lights, past gaping hollows of shop windows and abandoned market stalls, temporarily placed but eternally existing, past placards glued to the stone fences and matte-red lanterns of half-sleeping cafes. Chestnut alleyway quickly comes to an end, Mariya now hides in shadows of the houses and their doorways, there're no lights in any of the windows around her and it appears to Mariya that she turned out in some other city, in another time or in another life.

Yulia turns into the street that leads steeply down, houses dissolve around her, overgrown with chestnuts and linden, garages take their place, then she takes another turn and approaches a low stone fence, it stretches endlessly along the sidewalk, tree branches hang above it. Mariya has nowhere left to hide, she

stops on the corner of the last garage and snuggles up to its cool surface. Yulia slows down, walks along the fence as if trying to remember something, then she takes a look back and suddenly enters the wall, disappearing from Mariya's field of view. Mariya rushes forward, as she runs across the street she notices a gate in the fence with some dead flowers lying beside on the ground. A marble plaque is nailed to the wall next by with an inscription engraved in golden ink of unearthly origin. This is one of the city cemeteries.

Mariya likes cemeteries even less than she likes deadmen. Cautiously she approaches the gate and looks through it into the pitch black of the main cemetery alley, she still hopes there would be no need to cross the borderline of the humid gloom. Again Mariya recalls her grandmother's funeral and strange impressions of that time return to her once more. Deadmen live in a peculiar world, one can not simply see them, they're lowered underground in coffins strewn with flowers and they don't want to get back. Grandmother in the coffin looked somewhat odd but so very much alive that Mariya couldn't grasp at all why she was getting buried in the first place. There was loud and unpleasant music playing and although grandmother couldn't stand the loud sounds in her entire life - she paid them no attention, it means that was necessary to enter the deadmen community. Mariya can't remember which cemetery grandmother is buried in, maybe even on this one and now all of a sudden she'll show up on the alley holding her bag and she'll call Mariya to make her eat one of her old dried up candies.

Mariya has already decided to wait for Yulia outside, but suddenly she sees her from the back, standing in the tree shadow on the alley's side, she is simply standing still and looking someplace by her side. There is no wind, the birds are asleep and a deafening silence falls upon Mariya. Yulia is motionless like a sculpture. For some reason Mariya gets scared, she looks back at the desolated street and shivers as if the air suddenly got saturated with a tiny drizzle. As she stares at Yulia's frozen figure, a strange thought crosses her mind, perhaps this is the way the dead ones live in the silent stillness of their graves. Fear starts to choke Mariya, she grabs as hard as she can at the painted rough surface of the iron gate and quivers. Yulia kneels down next to the tree she is standing and lays down on the ground. Mariya tears her hands off the gate and rushes away. She runs back, up the street, the sky floats past her high above sprinkled with stars, the houses around her appear to be dead since long ago, like Egyptian pyramids, and altogether not existing for the sake of human lives as she thought before. She doesn't want to know who built them and for what reason, she merely wants to hide herself from the almighty eyes that blink on the open peacock's tail of death. Fear of pain and humiliation she experienced before is nothing compared to this fear of the dreadful eternal perishment. Mariya runs for her life, bruising her feet till blood against the asphalt, but at once she understands there's nowhere to run to. Dark attic scares her just like the pitch black streets of this decayed city, and when she sees a bread delivery truck slowly turning into the tilted street ahead of her, headlights

flashing bright, she shrieks and dashes to the trees, kneels down into their shadows and snuggles at their roots to conceal herself from the vehicle that drives from the other world. Without a haste the truck passes by the tree Mariya is hiding behind, it takes another turn and the sound of its engine vanishes behind the garages, its red light melts away like a fading cigarette butt. Mariya cries a bit out of helplessness and fear and goes back to the cemetery to check what happened to Yulia.

Yulia is still lying lifeless on the ground underneath a tree and Mariya understands that she has died. Just like uncle Andrey's corpse, Yulia's corpse draws her to itself, all of a sudden she opens the gate and crosses the alley as if sleepwalking. Her feet she scratched up while running are now on fire and Mariya sighs with relief as she steps on the cool grass. Yulia lies on her back, her body awkwardly twisted, her arms outstretched and bent at the elbows, when Mariya comes closer she discerns that her mouth is stuffed with grass. Yulia's eyes are open but just like all the dead - she can't see Mariya, her head is slightly turned to the side, facing the tombstone crosses, her hair entwining the grass next to the tree trunk. And she is breathing.

Dead ones can not breathe, thinks Mariya, that means Yulia is alive. Then why is she lying on the ground with grass stuck in her mouth and doesn't notice Mariya? Mariya touches Yulia with her toes but she doesn't move. Mariya squats next to her and then her eyes, already used to the dark, distinguish a stain on the tree just above Yulia's head, the bark there is darker than the rest of the trunk, it resembles a splash of some dark or transparent liquid. Mariya

hesitantly stretches out her arm and touches the stain. It's dry, probably the liquid has dried up a while ago. Quite a while ago. Mariya raises her eyes and looks up, past the black leaves, stars grip the skies above the earth, the wind of silence blows through Mariya's hair, and at once she understands what happened, as if somebody opened a book in front of her and all is written on one of its pages. The star mill turns in the opposite direction.

She sees Yulia, lying under the tree in the same way, clothes torn apart, bruise on her shoulder, one can see scratches through the holes, grass with some little graveyard flowers sticks out of her mouth, and she doesn't breathe, doesn't breathe at all, and the blood is flowing down the tree trunk. Mariya understands clearly where did the blood come from, because Yulia's hair is soaked in it and she lies among them like a scarlet grape in the evening among the leaves of its vines, with the grass around her sprinkled in some dark and heavy dew, just before it dawns. Someone who killed Yulia and tore up her clothes wanted to do the same thing to her as uncle Andrey wanted to do to Mariya, only when she was dead. Mariya can not imagine at all what it could be and because of that it gets even scarier, she knows that first the body gets touched and probably some sort of cruelty comes next, some awful thing like Yulia said, and that, Mariya knows for sure, is very painful. Boys in her school called it "groping". So one must grope first in order to understand how to hurt after that. And not simply to hurt but to hurt in some special way, like when for example uncle Andrey began to lick her face before tormenting her. And that is especially scary. When father was beating

Mariya she knew the cause and she knew that at some moment he would stop. However the awful thing is causeless and therefore merciless like death. Mariya sits down to the ground next to Yulia and buries her face in her hands to quit seeing that nightmare realm she always lived in.

Earth floats and rotates underneath her like a huge water lily, she loses balance, falls to the side and curls up. Crushing numbness descends upon her, Mariya takes her bloody hands from her face and sees Yulia opening her eyes. They seem especially big and bright as if illuminated by some lamp, the skin on Yulia's face shifts like water surface in the wind, she turns to Mariya and emits a quiet clicking sound, her hair crumple under her cheek, rustling and breaking against the grass, trees behind Yulia's shoulder are woven from mica linen, graveyard crosses are rising like long neon stalactites between the trunks.

Mariya twitches, curves her back, grabs at the grass and freezes, shaking above the sky abyss, a wheeze breaks out from her throat. She is overwhelmed by laughter and fear at the same time, laughter out of fear and fear because of laughter. She slowly crawls with her back from the shore of the alleyway that transformed into a river, lined in water squares, her face changes, blood flows out of her nose. She presses her head against the tomb fence, convulses and breathes deeply out of astounding joy, she takes her hand full with grass to her mouth and sticks it in it. She tastes bitterness and moisture, a long star mill sleeve captures her, raises in the air and drops on the grass again, she grabs Yulia's hand who laughs and pulls Mariya towards herself, both of them squirm by the tree, make faces at the darkness, spit

out the grass, briefly giggle and then again sob in tears, Mariya groans in an ill manner and rolls over Yulia, feeling her bones underneath herself, she tears at the grass and twists on the ground, making all sorts of animalistic sounds, face tangled in hair, earth crunches between her teeth, she doesn't know anything, but her body twitches and jerks until her strength abandons her. Then she holds still and listens to her heartbeat. Yulia lies next to her, her mouth is open and there is no grass in it anymore. Her hair has revealed one side of her neck and Mariya notices a dark elongated bruise that continues up to her head and bleeds.

- Are you in pain? - carefully asks Mariya.
- No, - answers Yulia. - It was painful when they beat me.
- Who did?
- Men, - says Yulia barely moving her lips. - Dragged me to the car, wrapped my face in some cloth, - she slowly continues, - so I could barely breathe. They brought me here, hit me on the head then kicked in the stomach. Then did the awful thing till it bled and when they got bored - hit my neck with an ironpiece.
- And what next?
- I died, that's what. They blew my brains out.
- But you're alive, - objects Mariya.
- You think so? It only looks like that.
- So you're dead?
- I just told you.
- You are dead?!
- Shhh, enough! - Yulia says in a loud whisper and presses her palm against Mariya's mouth. It

smells like fresh graveyard grass, slugs and something else. - Stop screaming.

Mariya becomes silent, she looks at the trees that grow behind Yulia's back.

- And me?
- You? You're alive. Do you feel how I stink?
- Yes.
- It's because I'm dead. I'm rotting. Are you afraid?
- Yes, - quietly agrees Mariya.
- Want to go back home to mother and father?
- No, - says Mariya in a not very confident manner, for some reason she recalls Yulia murdering uncle Andrey, how she kept calm and just squinted slightly to avoid blood getting into her eyes.
- Didn't you notice before how I stink? - Yulia squirms in anger, - Like a dead dog. I'm rotting. And the perfume doesn't help. When you were sleeping with me in the attic didn't you feel the stank?
- I thought it's a mouse, - answers Mariya.
- It's not a mouse, - mocks her Yulia. - And not even a bunny. Have you ever thought about dying?
- Yes.
- And what'll happen after?
- I don't know. Probably nothing.
- Imagine that after you die they'll do the awful thing to you.
- Who?
- I don't know. But someone isn't human-like.
- And you?
- And I'm revived.

Death

In silence they lie prone on the grass next to a tomb fence. The night cemetery is huge, to Mariya it appears to be bigger than the city, and that the city is merely a sleeping island amidst the world of the dead. Now the skies are calm and flat like a water pond on a windless evening. Dark mist of silence hangs throughout the air. It seems strange to Mariya that she is still alive and not dead like everything around her. She recalls her past life in brief pictures, they are mute and covered in brown plaque of time, people's faces on them are retouched to a doll-like resemblance.

- Yulia, - quietly calls she.
- What?
- What did they do to you by the tree back then?
What is the awful thing?
- Do you really want to know?
- Yes.

Yulia tells her what exactly the awful thing is. Mariya is appalled and she contemplates for a long time how such a thing can happen at all.

- And what size are they? - asks she.
- Like this, - Yulia shows with her hands.
- Ouch. So why are they doing this?
- It's pleasant for them. And they also like hurting you.

Mariya remembers how her father was beating her and it seems to her that was pleasant for him as well. Did he want to do the awful thing to her? And why didn't he?

- So what, all the men do the awful thing?
Everybody?
- Yes.
- And everybody around knows about that?

Again Mariya gets horrified out of understanding what sort of world she lives in. Sooner or later they would have done the awful thing to her and she knew nothing about it surrounded by a silent conspiracy. Her past transforms into a nightmare. She keeps laying quietly, stretched on the grass, and slowly dives into the depth of this nightmare like a diver with her face down. All of them wanted to torture her, to watch her torment, and truly wished her no good at all. She was that kitten getting dropped from the rooftop. Mariya again remembers uncle Andrey, his moist tongue, dull eyes and heavy breath, as if he would be drunk although he didn't drink anything, the curse of the awful thing took over him, transformed him into an animal, he as well only wanted to do that terrible inconceivable thing to Mariya, to her body that has not been made for that at all, to torture her in that sadistic inhumane manner, he wanted her pain and tears. So uncle Andrey got upon himself what he wanted to do to Mariya, he got slaughtered like a feral beast and he won't be able to do the awful thing to anybody anymore. If uncle Andrey would lie here, Mariya would kick him in the face, she would kick him until his mug got properly smashed because that filth he wanted to do to her can't be redeemed even in death.

- Scumbag, - says she. - Damn filth.
- Who is? - asks Yulia.
- Uncle Andrey.

- Quit thinking about him. He's gone, - says Yulia
- They'll bury him.
- He's still a scumbag, - Mariya enjoys repeating the swear word. She wasn't allowed to swear before so couldn't understand why she knew those words whatsoever.
- Want to go kill another one?

Mariya turns her head and stares at Yulia but she doesn't laugh.

- So what, let's go? Are you afraid?
- No, - answers Mariya but her lips are trembling in an unpleasant manner.
- I'll do the killing, - says Yulia. - Me. You'll just watch, - suddenly she smiles so clearly and gently, she laughs quietly and Mariya for some unknown reason also laughs and wipes the earth from her face with her wrist.

They stumble through the night streets without any direction, moving between lifeless buildings like little asteroids move through the shadows of star clouds, lanterns pass them by like huge cosmic luminaries, Mariya's steps are light and her nostrils breathe with the aroma of death. Death around her suchlike endless fields of white flowers engulfed in silence, suchlike the moon hanging low above the ground, breezing with frost of its eternity, and Mariya is not afraid to get lost among the dark streets anymore because she doesn't care where to be in this still necropolis with the obscure power given to her over it.

Finally they meet a person slowly walking in the tree shadows, it's a young man, probably a student, middle height, dressed in summer trousers and a short-sleeved shirt, a watch glinting on his arm.

Mariya doesn't recognize him as an exemplary of her own species, instinctively slowing down her pace she approaches him, she is a hunter, sneaking up on a deer that grazes on a night meadow, he is indeed a deer for her, beautiful and strong beast that inhabits mysterious world of sleepy apartments and hallways, she observes athletic figure of the time carrier, his white sneakers, his blind face with shadows rolling over it, she feels a power hidden within him, a power dangerous for the human kind.

Yulia leaves Mariya, crosses the narrow road and asks the bypasser what time it is. He stops, lifts his hand up into the lantern's light spot and precisely calls the time of his ending. Yulia presses herself against him, wraps her arms around his neck, rises up on her tiptoes and reaches his face with her mouth. They kiss, the bypasser grabs Yulia behind her back and pulls her closer so her shirt, muddied with the graveyard soil, lifts up and partly reveals her waist. Yulia's fingers brush through his hair, she rubs against him with her breast and stomach, then suddenly she takes her mouth off his lips and bites at his neck. All of it happens with a lightning speed and in a complete silence, as if someone quickly opened a tap - a fountain of blood sprays up next to Yulia's cheek leaving a wide running trail behind, both of them twitch, the bypasser grabs Yulia by the hair to pull her off his throat, then she lowers her hand with some object in it, and with that object she hits him in the stomach, one, two, three. He leans forward and falls down, carrying her with him, she twists away from underneath him, he jerks and tries to stand up on his knees, blood bursts out of his neck like out of a siphon.

Truly resilient is this unknown wayfarer of the night who traveled from nowhere to nowhere, he presses his hand at his bitten neck, wheezes, shakes his head and tries to stand up to punch Yulia, but the pain in his stomach cripples him, already he can only hold on one knee, his wheeze turns into a swearing and a heavy groan, then Yulia who kept at a short distance grabs him by the hair and quickly hits him in the face, now Mariya can clearly identify a knife in her hand. Specifically the knife fills Mariya with repulsion, sharp metal that rips through living human flesh, it makes her feel another's suffering. Involuntarily she shrieks and turns away, shuts her eyes, presses her bent elbows to her sides and tries to overcome nausea. She gets cold because of the sweat drops that appear on her skin, and Mariya simply sits down on the asphalt as it's easier to keep herself from fainting like that. The nausea wouldn't back off and the silence is still ringing in her ears.

- Let's go, - says Yulia while standing tall next to her. Her face and shirt are splattered with blood. Mariya nods and presses out a pale smile, trying not to give away the nausea that crushes her throat. - Can you walk? You're probably afraid of blood.

Mariya nods again, agreeing that she is indeed afraid of blood, but she can not imagine how she is supposed to stand up. Yulia pulls her by the arms, Mariya leans on her calm body, finally manages to stand up and slowly wanders into somewhere, licking at her lips and thinking only about vomit.

- Puke here, - says Yulia after a tortuous path, she bends Mariya down to the black circle of a

garbage bin. Mariya pukes in an ugly manner, coughing in pain, Yulia patiently holds her by the shoulders, the garbage bin stinks badly like dead meat puffs. After vomiting Mariya feels herself in a huge night hall with white lanterns like a schoolgirl that failed some sort of a mysterious test.

Amidst the lawn Yulia pours in her cupped hands some water out of a hole in a water hose and washes her face. They entered a strange place, an abandoned yard, Mariya sees a crumbled stone fence, bushes of burdock and a rusty bus among them, it appears to be sunken into the earth because it has no wheels. The bus windows are broken, its hideous pop-eyed face bares teeth in a death agony. Washed, Yulia passes through the burdock and beckons Mariya. Mariya hears a black piano playing in the middle of the night somewhere behind the trees, in a flat one can't spot from here.

Up the bent steps, filled up with rotten water, they climb inside the bus interior, it smells like excrement and decayed foam rubber of the seats. Mariya can't see anything in such darkness and she probes every step with her foot, afraid to cut herself with some broken glass or to step in a pile of litter. Then there is a light flash ahead of her, Yulia lights up a match, she's on the back seat, a metal bowl stands next to her, and inside of it - white worms crawling all over a putrid meat pulp. Yulia unbuttons her shirt on the chest, takes a bloody meat piece from behind her back and throws it to the worms. Mariya has never seen a penis but she understands that it is a piece of the bypasser and that all the meat in the bowl is of the same sort.

She turns away and, before vomiting all over the seat, promises herself not to eat anything ever again. She coughs with her eyes shut and can't see as Yulia catches with her hand flies that swarm above the bowl and eats them.

A police investigator Oleg Petrovich Korovin sits in his smoke-filled cabinet in the evening and drinks his foul and bitter coffee out of a chipped cup, he stares at the plants dying in their pots on the window sill. Life of Oleg Petrovich lasts just like with those yellowing plants that can't stand the nicotine stiffness and slowly fade under the pale light that pierces through the dusty window. Oleg Petrovich wants to spit out that stuff he just sipped out of the cup, even if simply on the floor, but he swallows it, and charcoal bitterness burns through his throat so his whole body convulses, from the top of his head to the tips of his toes. Coffee has been brewed in the cantina by a young and lascivious salesgirl Katya, five times Oleg Petrovich has already slept with her on a leather sofa in his office after work. Katya is puny, not pretty and all the time sweating hard with repulsive cold sweat as if she would constantly be scared of something.

Oleg Petrovich is thinking about another day that went by, his sleepiness that makes him indifferent to everything, his nauseating pain in the stomach that started a week ago, about his wife who has been abandoning him in a burdensome and slowly manner and her sister who is dying of bowel cancer, about all the other filth that burdens him day to day, he

sighs, runs his hand over his bald head and takes another sip.

The table of Oleg Petrovich is cramped with yellowed documents, worn out folders stuffed with case files, broken pencils, pieces of tobacco, ashes and bread crumbs, the only free space on it is right in front of him and on it sit the case papers that already for a few months continuously pour liquid cyanide into the exhausted stomach of the investigator. This is the case of brutal murders, eleven men, nine with a knife, one with a straight razor and one with an axe, all of them got their genitals removed from their bodies. Lots of blood. Among investigators this case is called a "monk case" because of the imminent post mortem castration of the victim, as a matter of fact this is the case of the little dead girl Yulia Zaitseva.

Oleg Petrovich knows everything about the case, he remembers faces and names of all the victims, remembers all the postures the bodies were found in, remembers time of deaths, all of them after eleven o'clock in the evening, remembers those crime spots, now forever changed for him, those houses, streets, trees, lanterns, parked cars. He knows that a girl of about thirteen years old participates in murders, or at least she is present at the scene shortly before the victim's death, her tracks have been found on the blood spills and on the parquet floor, asphalt and grass. She has dark red hairs that were found in the hands of three victims, they established her finger- and even lip prints. But Oleg Petrovich is more concerned about the second perpetrator's persona, as if non-existent at all. He leaves no tracks, no fingerprints, merely deep and deadly wounds on

victims' bodies, those wounds are caused by such a brute force that Oleg Petrovich has no doubts: it's a grown up, physically well developed man. Once again Oleg Petrovich runs his hand over his bald head, with a cold professionalism he imagines the killer, what might he look like, maybe he even has the same hair color as the daughter. Oleg Petrovich also has a version of the motive for the crimes - revenge for some sort of violence that happened to his close one, his wife or maybe that very girl whom he uses as bait. Often there are some light struggle marks on the corpses, as if they would fight the girl, probably the victim tries to copulate with the girl, then suddenly gets attacked and killed by the man with a knife. As a matter of fact, the killer might not be revenge driven at all, perhaps it's merely a paranoid wish to preserve public morality. Oleg Petrovich once knew a killer who murdered his three children, concerned about them becoming the same sort of shithhead he was himself - he lifted up this burden off humanity. Anyways, whatever was the case with that monk, it was the thing Oleg Petrovich was afraid of for his whole career - now he must investigate a serial murder.

Oleg Petrovich puts his unfinished coffee on the table and lights up a cigarette. Because of the smoke he feels at ease, that disgusting brew he just swallowed tastes slightly less bitter. Oleg Petrovich has long since checked all the rape and murder cases in the city that involve red-haired girls. The results were not exactly encouraging. There were so many victims and all of them had at least eighty percent solid alibi. Certainly the killer might have moved from another city where the initial crime

happened in the first place, that meant Oleg Petrovich had to check everybody who legally moved in the last years. It came out that during the last five years there were no suspicious red-haired girls of primary or secondary school age moving into the city for permanent residency.

Already since a month all over the railway stations agents of Oleg Petrovich, disguised as stinky bums, vendors of exotic postcards and red-mugged porters, have been executing a total surveillance on the newcomers, all the men with young girls have been registered in the black lists, but the killer is elusive, he reigns in the city like a man-eating tiger, a savage spirit of revenge, he kills wherever and whoever he wants.

Oleg Petrovich shakes off the cigarette ashes with his ring finger into a saucer that takes the place of an ashtray and thinks about the feral beast. His experience tells him that the usual hunting methods will be fruitless until he understands something that gives him advantage over the beast, something that would make him able to take a leading move. He is assured that there is the key to it all, but there is no time to look for it because the beast keeps killing. And then Oleg Petrovich has no other way out except for the old school one: to lure the beast out. The lure has to be a human being. It will be himself.

Without a knock the office door opens slightly, Katya peeks in with her dark eyes, lustfully glittering in the electric light. She doesn't speak a word but Oleg Petrovich understands that she wants to get to the sofa. He shakes his head tiredly and deadly grief touches Katya's face, she says "Goodbye", carefully shuts the door and soon the

sound of her heels knocking on the squeaky parquet quiets down along the hallway. Oleg Petrovich has no pity for Katya, she will find somebody to sleep with, as a last resort there is a husband.

He squishes his cigarette butt in the saucer, stands up, puts on his jacket, takes his pistol from the drawer, takes the safety off it and for a long time he keeps standing at the wall with a barrel stuck in his mouth, finally he puts the weapon into his pocket and exits the office. Oleg Petrovich walks the empty hallways of the police station, lights already switched off, he recalls his children, a son aged fifteen and a daughter aged six, that means he's thinking about death and he's sure he will encounter the beast already today. Nobody knew about his decision to go for a personal hunt, Oleg Petrovich has been contemplating it for two weeks, he is a middle-aged bald office-duty investigator with an aching side and a tired heart, more than anything in this world he didn't want to encounter a serial killer, this bloodthirsty butcher, but so abides his fate. The fact it is indeed his fate he couldn't realize at first, but when he finally did - it became a firm assurance. His hour has come. In order to untie this knot his personal participation was necessary, maybe even his life. There was some sort of intangible connection between him and the maniac, as if they would have already met someplace else and knew each other for a long time. He has to take a look at him, to stare into his satanic eyes. He has to gun him down or die himself trying. Perhaps that was indeed the entire reason for his life.

While the old hunter goes out onto the pathway, lit up by the electric moons, Mariya and Yulia are merely a block away drinking their milk shakes at the white table of a summer cafe, lamps shine mysteriously, neatly hidden in chestnut foliage, drunken women laugh and breathe softly with their warm breasts into men's palms that sneak up on them, waiters in white shirts carry around trays lined with glasses, their straws pierce through tart lemon circles. Women laugh at their tables, preparing for jolly pleasures of a warm summer night, Mariya and Yulia keep silent, anticipating their next murder.

In ten minutes they disappear into the chestnut trees' shadows, right at the moment when, continuing to sit at the table, they could have seen Oleg Petrovich slowly walking on the pavement along the empty road, black due to a sprinkler truck, he smokes a cigarette and blindly stares ahead. He stops next to a telephone booth, hands in pockets, and keeps standing, seemingly looking at the dead grocery store and a sixteen-storage house rising next by, it merges with the night sky above so that those few still illuminated windows appear to shine right there, in the charcoal height, however, nobody knows for a fact what exactly he sees there.

Yulia picks another way, perpendicular to the street where the hunter is looking for her, she dives into courtyards filled with darkness, garbage stench and snake-like cat shadows. They walk slowly and Mariya lifts her head up to meet again the stars sprinkled over the black rectangular between the rooftops like flowers sprinkle a meadow. Today there is a thin crescent, as if made out of butter, so thin and

tender, it gives no light and merely hangs in the skies. Mariya sighs because she will never be able to touch the crescent and returns her sight back to earth, a barred lamp sticks out from the darkness, two lovers are leaning against the indistinguishable wall behind the tree, they ache in their silent love while dead old men stumble through the labyrinth of courtyards, having been living here not so long ago they recall their times. Mariya is not afraid of dead old men because today Yulia gave her a weapon - a knife with a blade as long as Mariya's palm, in case the person they will be killing jumps at Mariya to hurt her. The knife hangs on her neck tucked in a tied up ribbon so she can take it out through the hole in her unbuttoned shirt, it's still colder than Mariya's body and its blade pleasantly touches her skin while she is walking. Mariya didn't want to take the knife but Yulia terrified her with stories of vicious and resilient sort of game that even wounded still can't feel the death grip for a while and may attack its flayer.

Yulia turns to Mariya, puts her hand with a thumb at her cheek and points with her index finger to the right, two boys a couple years older than them are smoking on the bench next to the house entry. Mariya gets scared and she shakes her head in disavowal. Yulia's face shows surprise.

- There're two of them, - whispers Mariya.

Yulia shrugs and heads towards the bench. Mariya looks at her walking easily, she straightens her hair and moves a cloth bag that hangs on her shoulder to her back. Inside the bag she has a knife. She says something to the boys, points with her hand at Mariya and beckons her to them. Mariya reluctantly goes to

them, already feeling the tremor and trying to look as relaxed as possible. They get to know each other. Boys are called Igor and Vitya. After two silly jokes Igor suggests to go get some sparkling wine.

- We don't have much time, - says Yulia. - Let's better play blind man's buff. In the hallway.

Boys didn't expect such audacity and stare at Yulia in astonishment.

- Are you afraid or what? - sneeringly asks she.

Mariya understands right away that Yulia offers boys the awful thing. They stand up from the bench.

- How do you mean blind man's buff? - asks Igor, curling his beautiful lips in a smile. He looks into Mariya's eyes so she has to look away. He has dark wavy hair and an elegant neck. Mariya has a strange feeling, some sort of wish, it gets chilly and she adjusts her hair with moisty fingers.

- Blind man's buff means that one shuts his eyes and can't see anything, - jolly answers Yulia. - And nothing can get into one's eyes.

They go up the fourth floor in a yellow elevator, Mariya is looking at a dried up puddle on the floor and at Igor's shoes knowing that he is looking at her as well. From the fourth floor they get one flight down.

- Mariya, you start, - says Yulia. She runs down the stairs to the third floor and then even further downwards. Vitya quickly goes after her, submerging into eternal darkness.

Igor doesn't go away, suddenly he turns to Mariya, takes her by the shoulders and kisses on her mouth. Mariya freezes and bears with it, forgetting to close her mouth while he begins to grope her with calm

stroking movements, she stares at the grey stripe of light on the wall of the barren hallway, there aren't even any insects dwelling in it. Igor unbuttons her jeans and turns her with her back towards himself. Only at this moment Mariya finally grasps what he wants to do to her, terror sears through her as if she has approached the edge of a raging volcano crater. Igor tries to bend her forwards, she shrieks and breaks away towards the window, he grabs her, in that silent struggle she pulls out the knife with one of her hands, turns around and in one mighty push forces it below Igor's chest. The knife goes in with difficulty like into a slab of sinewy meat, Igor gasps and, releasing Mariya, doubles over in pain.

She runs up the stairs, turns around and looks at him from the darkness. The knife has stayed in his chest, Igor continues to stand, face twisted in pain. Then he hoarsely sighs and blood starts to flow out of his mouth. Mariya gets scared of that, climbs even higher up the stairs, to the next floor, and watches from there over a dying boy. His face, barely distinguishable in the darkness, appears beautiful to her. She feels so much pity for him she would even tolerate the awful thing from him, just don't let him die. But Igor can not live anymore, he pulls the knife out of his body, takes a step to the side to lean with his shoulder against the wall by the window, slowly slides down, wheezing and choking on blood, suddenly he simply drops to the floor and his legs begin to twitch. Mariya rushes to the elevator. Her heart drums like mad inside her chest. For a few times inside the elevator she almost manages to faint, but every time she recovers and notices that time has stopped and wouldn't move at all. Finally

the doors go open and she runs through the hallway to the fresh air, black as tasteless smoke, it pierces her with cold because she is soaked with sweat.

Yulia is standing right at the door, she grabs Mariya by the hand and pulls her towards herself. Her cool lips touch Mariya's cheek and she feels the rotten smell of her friend's hair.

- Oh you dirty, - tenderly whispers Yulia, - so what happened there between you? Did he do to you something like this? - she begins groping Mariya and kissing her on the cheek and on the neck.
- Let go, let go - Mariya turns her face away and tries to break free.
- Well, did you finish him? - asks Yulia in the same quiet manner between the kisses, gently hugging Mariya's back and cuddling her.
- I... stabbed him with a knife, - casually answers Mariya.
- How many times?
- Once.
- Once? - Yulia laughs, throwing back her head. - One time? Oh you my bunny! - she grabs Mariya by the cheek and drags her into the hallway. - He must be still alive!
- Blood came out of his mouth... I won't go, I won't go, let me go! - Mariya snaps away her hand but Yulia grabs it again and pulls her up the stairs to the elevator.
- Why are we going there? - asks Mariya almost breaking in tears, squeezed to the dirty elevator wall all scratched up with a nail. Yulia doesn't answer her and simply kisses Mariya's face again.
- Quit kissing!

- Oh you're so sweet, you can't even imagine, like a chocolate bar, - laughs Yulia. - But you have nothing to be afraid of, I can't do the awful thing to you. I just love you. Well, kiss me, my bunny.
- Let's not go there, I don't want to, - begs Mariya as the elevator comes to a stop, its doors slide open towards the darkness. That elevator is the only illuminated place in this horrifying house and Mariya doesn't want to leave it.
- Come on don't be afraid, I'm with you, - Yulia kisses her on the lips and crosses the border between light and darkness.

They get out to the hallway and see the empty spot on the staircase, but the floor and the leading down steps are stained with blood. Yulia pulls the knife out of her bag and starts running down the stairs holding her hand on the railing.

- Don't! - cries out Mariya and rushes after her. On the run she notices Igor below her, he leans on the wall and slowly walks down the stairs.

He hears Yulia's footsteps behind him and turns around, she drops on him from above, knocks him off his feet, both of them fall on the floor, Yulia presses him down with one of her hands and begins viciously stabbing him with the other one. Mariya clenches at the railing, once again she's not feeling well. Igor jerks and howls trying to push Yulia away from himself, in a moment his howl cuts short with a gurgling wheeze when Yulia grabs him by the hair and smashes his head against the floor. Then she pins him down sideways, facing his legs, like a butcher on a pig, pulls down his trousers a bit and sticks the knife in there. Igor screams in such a gut-wrenching

manner that Mariya must close her ears with her hands, a flash of otherworldly light slices the world in front of her in half, and between the halves she can clearly see as Mariya cuts with the knife inside boy's pants, like gutting a fish, he screams again and again, tormented with pain, somewhere upstairs, the way they came from, a door lock clicks and a door gets opened, Mariya shrieks and races down the stairs taking quick steps with her little shoes. The last bestial howl cuts already somewhere above her head, on one of the floors she sees a man storming out of his apartment with an axe, he shouts something to her with his sleepy voice but Mariya doesn't answer, continuing her run until she smashes open the entry door with her body, only to run further in a straight line, past the children playground, behind a transformer booth, she leans on its wall still warm from the daylight sun, then she vomits, clumsily steps over the puddle, crawls along the wall a bit more and begins to sob violently, not managing in time to wipe her tears off the face.

Yulia approaches her from the direction of the house, barely illuminated by a far away lantern, she tears Mariya off the wall and drags her somewhere to the west because the east is already flashing in blue lightnings of police sirens.

- Get that, I cut it out while he was still alive
eh, - remembers Yulia laughing.

First they walk and then run through the courtyards and side streets, losing themselves in the gloom that smells after blooming bushes. They don't notice a lone human silhouette standing far away on one of those streets, but the person spots them right on.

Oleg Petrovich has been lured here by the alarming sounds of police sirens, he jogs towards the place where death has built its nest today, obeying his infallible instinct of a scavenger, to whom a corpse means his living. By the entry that gapes its maw in the blue flashes of light he shows his identification to a young blonde policeman called Vasya Ryzhov, together with him he goes up to the second floor, two other policemen are questioning a witness on it, he calls for another police squad on the phone, orders to not let anyone out from the hallway because the witness has seen only two girls, that means the killer could still be here. After that Oleg Petrovich picks up Ryzhov, gets into the car and makes him race to the spot he saw two running girls pass by, on the way he swears, smokes a cigarette and forces Vasya to break the traffic rules.

Ryzhov diligently drives in circles through the night streets until they see two little criminals walking away in the street lamp haze, one of them is red-haired and Oleg Petrovich extinguishes his cigarette at the seat holder, feeling the cold of an oncoming hunt inside his chest.

- See those girls, drive at them. Careful, the criminal may be somewhere nearby, - quietly tells he to Ryzhov.

Vasya turns into the street Yulia and Mariya are walking and steps on gas. Hearing the engine sound Yulia turns around and jumps into a narrow gateway, dragging Mariya after herself. The car takes a quick squealing break by the gateway, Oleg Petrovich hops out first, but the gateway is on the left side of the road so Ryzhov dives into darkness before him. They find themselves in a narrow canyon between two long

houses, chestnuts growing in it here and there, a yellow lamp shining above one of the entries.

- Stop, police! - shouts out Oleg Pertovich on the run, but girls ahead continue running with all their might.

It's hard to run for Oleg Petrovich, he already gets tired, his age is showing and it would be good to smoke a bit less, but Vasya flies ahead of him in drumming steps, dark-haired one falls a bit behind, she looks back, helplessly shrieks, dodges Vasiya's hand on the run, red-haired one rushes to the entry, jerks open its door, but Ryzhov already managed to grab the dark-haired one by the shoulder, she loses balance and falls down on the asphalt, spreading her arms in front of herself. Leaving the pinned down prey to running Oleg Petrovich, Ryzhov rushes forward, yanks the door shut just in front of him and right at the threshold receives a fierce stab with a knife to his belly. Oleg Petrovich stands next to Mariya who tries to protect herself with her scratched up bloody hands and now he's watching in terror as Vasya doubles over with a swear and backpedals from the entry, red-haired girl appears next to him, using both of her hands as if handling an axe, she strikes him with the knife under the left shoulder blade of his curved back. She pulls out the knife and Vasya drops down. Her face turns towards Oleg Petrovich and he understands that there was no reason to block that first house because the killer is right here in front of him.

It all occurred like in a dream, he wanted to find it and so he did. Oleg Petrovich takes the pistol out of his pocket.

- Drop the knife, - calmly tells he to Yulia, although his neck muscle is convulsing in a cramp out of the horrible fate of Vasya Ryzhov.

She stands still and looks at him. In her eyes Oleg Petrovich sees something so very inhuman that he feels uncanny. In a rapid dash she disappears behind the opened door of the entry and Oleg Petrovich almost pulls the trigger. He gives a short swear, bends down and lifts Mariya up by her hand from the ground. She is all shivering and borderline crying. He clenches at her elbow and pushes her forward, approaching the entry as quickly as his caution lets him. It's dark inside the hallway and he has to wrap his pistol hand around Mariya's neck from behind to hold a lighter in the other one.

Its fire illuminates short stairs and rows of metal post boxes along the wall. Yulia is nowhere to be seen. Oleg Petrovich drags Mariya upstairs, waving the lighter from side to side, and rings the first door he stumbles upon. After the third ring something scrapes behind the door and a woman's voice asks who it is.

- Open up, police! - loudly says Oleg Petrovich. The woman hesitates, there is probably no man in the flat. - Open up now, a man is dying! - shouts Oleg Petrovich, out of anger he squeezes Mariya's neck so hard it darkens in her eyes and she grabs at his hand with hers. A light sparks up inside the peephole and the door goes slightly open on the chain. In its vertical gap Oleg Petrovich sees a scared face.
- Open it, open it, dear, there is a wounded policeman lying there on the street, quickly call the ambulance, - says Oleg Petrovich. The door

shuts, the woman takes off its chain, opens it again and runs down to the telephone placed on the shelf in the corridor right underneath a mirror. She calls the ambulance. Only at this moment Oleg Petrovich brings his mind to put out the lighter. He keeps the door open in case Yulia tries to break away.

- Now let me call the police and you can search the girl please, she may have a weapon - says Oleg Petrovich. Mariya quietly endures the woman searching her. She smells like soap and sleepy linen. There is no weapon on Mariya. Oleg Petrovich calls up another squad to the same address the woman called up the ambulance before him. A child appears from the depth of the apartment - a girl about six years old, she woke up because of all the noise and is now watching her mother wiping up Mariya's palms with a cotton wool soaked in vodka. After finishing his phone talk Oleg Petrovich stands by the door. Mariya stares at him and begins to cry because she, as the one who stabbed Igor with the knife, will get trialed and for sure shot right after that.
- It's alright, it's alright, it doesn't pinch anymore - says the woman.

The little girl walks down to Mariya and curiously peeks at her bloody palms. Mariya quits crying and thinks that it is time Yulia finally kills Oleg Petrovich. She heard him calling the police and if they arrive it will be too late. The woman moves to the cabinet to find a jar of iodine, Mariya looks askew and sees a knife lying still on the table. All of the following happens very quickly, Mariya grabs the knife and dashes to the little girl. Holding her

warm little body close she puts a knife blade at her throat.

- Let me go! - screams she, in hope that Yulia will hear her too. - Or I'll kill her!

Right away the little girl starts to sob out of horror, she spreads her arms like a doll. The woman yells wildly, turning to Mariya with a iodine jar in her hand. Cool wave washes over Oleg Petrovich, he points the pistol at Mariya.

- Let the child go, - says he.
- I'll kill her! - furiously shouts Mariya, for some reason she pictures her father instead of Oleg Petrovich. - I'll cut her throat!

Stepping sideways she drags the girl from the kitchen to the corridor, after one clumsy move some blood appears from underneath the knife blade. The girl squeals like an animal. The woman drops iodine and clings to the edge of the table.

- Let the child go, nobody'll harm you, - speaks out Oleg Petrovich as calmly as he can.
- You're lying! Get away from the door! - screams Mariya. - Get away, bastard!
- I let you go, just leave the child alone, - patiently repeats Oleg Petrovich, taking a small step sideward. His words are barely audible because of the girl's loud crying. Mariya slides to the door sideways. From the corner of her eye she spots a stir, there, in the darkness of the staircase.
- Please leave her be, - softly says Oleg Petrovich. - I promise I'll let you go.

Mariya approaches the wall with her back, afraid to come closer to him. She is shivering and breathing heavily. Oleg Petrovich takes a slow step towards her

with an intent to pull her arm away from the child's throat in one rapid move.

- Don't come closer! - shouts Mariya, squeezing her hostage even harder.
- Let her go, she's crying, she's hurt - quietly repeats Oleg Petrovich, peeking into the hallway, illuminated by the lamp from the inside.

Having not spotted anything in there he takes another step, heart hammering in his chest, the step is a bit too abrupt, Mariya's hand begins its move and he instantly pulls the trigger. A bullet pierces Mariya's head and splashes a comet trail of bloody brain tissue on a light vertical stripe of wallpaper behind her. After such a mighty blow to the head she quits living straightaway and drops to the linoleum floor, dragging the girl along her. Oleg Petrovich rushes to her and puts the crying child on her feet, Mariya keeps lying still, turning her face to the wall, distorted by the terror of nearing death, her hand with the knife thrown back, legs knee-bent, hair spread across the floor like a dark bouquet.

The woman takes her daughter from Oleg Petrovich and soothes her in the kitchen, when nobody can see he touches with his finger the warm blood trail on the wall and tastes a small piece of Mariya's brain, it reminds him some sort of canned food he ate in his far away childhood. Oleg Petrovich throws a sad glance at the girl's head cracked open by a bullet, at the spot where her tender neckline melds into a cheek, an ear, an eye wide opened, a touching beauty, here and there his sight stumbles upon thin threads of hairs, her small lips are slightly opened, here is a spot where the soul left from, thinks he, then he turns around and walks out of the flat into darkness.

Love

Oleg Petrovich takes heavy steps up the stairs of the damned house, pointing the barrel of his gun forwards. His eyes get quickly used to the muddy darkness around, yet it is a bit diluted with some barely visible light, so weak it seems like it comes from stars. Such an endless and inhuman loneliness came upon Oleg Petrovich after killing Mariya as if she would be his last close person on the earth. Now he is ascending higher and higher like a cosmonaut that has been secretly sent to the galaxy's border to walk all the way by foot, in case the rockets would fail.

He is drawn by Yulia's scent he could smell already downstairs when he first approached her, the smell of death, terrifying and alluring at the same time. She could've entered any of the flats, simply ring the bell and ask for a hideout, they would've let her in and then she would drown them into the eternal silence. But the smell leads further and further upwards, as if Yulia doesn't want to involve anybody else in this deadly fight between the hunter and the game. This damned house has five floors, there is neither an elevator nor a garbage chute, not even any wall drawings as if humans live here merely on paper and in reality they moved abroad or even to the next world a long time ago. Perhaps that is why Yulia didn't go into those flats, inside of them waits bare emptiness.

One more floor to go. She has to be there, after the last flight, Oleg Petrovich sees a window opened into the starry darkness, a fire box filled with sand in

the middle of the staircase by the window, and Yulia who is sitting on the box, covering her face with her hands. A bloody knife lies next to her. Oleg Petrovich points his gun at her.

- Don't try to go for a knife or I'll kill you, - says he in a wheezing voice. - I already gunned down your friend. Right through her head.

Yulia continues sitting on the box, silently and still. Behind the dusty windows there is only blackness, but behind the cleared rectangle of the open sash the stars are shining so brightly - they appear to be sweet in taste.

- I'm crying, - suddenly says Yulia with a sort of resentment. - Oh God, how can I cry?

Invisible tears run down her cheeks. Then she takes her hands off her face. She is sitting with her back to the window and Oleg Petrovich can't distinguish her facial features, but he sees the deadly paleness of her skin as if it would be painted in white.

- What's going to happen now? - asks Yulia and her voice trembles. - I'm scared, - she stands up, turns around and walks to the window like she would walk to the execution, she continues crying only with tears and doesn't wipe her face, her hands are hanging down. She looks down, there on the asphalt still lies Vasya Ryzhov, from this height he appears to be merely an old coat somebody dropped behind.
- Shoot, - says Yulia. - I don't want to live anymore.
- Did she kill as well or was it only you? - asks Oleg Petrovich.
- Only me. She couldn't do it yet.
- But what for?

- Just like that, - answers Yulia. - I loved her.
- The ones you killed were also loved by somebody.
- You don't get it, - quietly says Yulia. - You don't get what love really is. True love. It's stronger than death.

The star river flows in the canyon between the houses. It's so quiet outside it appears that dead Vasya Ryzhov has been lying at the bottom of the canyon already for a few thousand years.

- Shoot, you bastard, - says Yulia in a snarling wheeze making a sharp turn towards Oleg Petrovich.

He feels the iron hand of death strangling something inside of his head and understands that Yulia probably doesn't even need a knife to kill him. His face contracts and he shoots her in the chest.

Because of the darkness one can not make out the exact spot bullet hits girl's body, leaving a bloody torn up hole in it, but Oleg Petrovich hears that it went right through and hit the wall behind, knocking a jet of moondust out of it.

- Well now you killed me didn't you? - asks Yulia, but her words drown in the avalanche of all engulfing deafness that rolls upon Oleg Petrovich, he heavily leans on the railing and slides down to the steps, clumsily twisting his foot.

Oleg Petrovich can't find words to answer Yulia. He gazes at her, turning cold out of his own muteness, and before he faints he takes another shot, in his inexplicable fury he aims for the head but misses and the bullet flies out towards the stars, however it doesn't become an earth satellite because Oleg Petrovich has put too little of his soul into that

shot. When the ambulance drives into the courtyard, the house is already submerged in a cosmic dream that unites both living and dead ones in the eternal brotherhood and Yulia Zaitseva has long ago since disappeared behind the veil of her otherworldly existence, soft and mysterious like a wing of a night butterfly.

She materializes again out of the night gloom some time later, on the unknown street, in the courtyard with a bus sunk deep into the ground, she goes inside, turns over the basin filled with rotting cocks, knocking a swarm of buzzing flies out of it and, keeping silent, in a calm frenzy she tramples rotten flesh, killing maggots and flies. Then she places herself on a seat and quietly stares forwards in the direction of the bus's movement along with a planet and around the sun until the dawn starts to break.

Vasya Ryzhov gets buried in the same cemetery where Yulia was once killed, there are a few friends present at the ceremony, along with his skinny blonde fiancée and tearful mother. Mariya gets identified on the missing persons list but nobody notifies her parents so they won't sue Oleg Petrovich, the girl's corpse is transported into a special morgue for investigative experiments. Yulia Zaitseva's case is now closed and Oleg Petrovich himself gets removed from his duties and put to a paperwork job instead. An ambulance brings him into a hospital and he is diagnosed with stomach ulcer, next day at one o'clock at night in his apartment he receives a phone call from his wife's friend she mostly lives with nowadays and he calls Oleg Petrovich a piece of shit. Oleg Petrovich hangs up and goes to sleep, he naps for

about half an hour, then he wakes up, sits down on the armchair and sticks a barrel of the pistol so deep into his mouth it touches the back of his throat. He continues sitting like that for a few hours until the throat starts to hurt badly with a taste of oiled metal. Then he lays down on the sofa and stays like that for twenty hours unable to drink or to eat.

In deep night silence Inna Genrihovna circles around her domain like a wrinkly ghost, in steps no mortal can hear. She floats from one room to another passing through otherworldly milky lights of blue lamps above her, she is old, ugly and naked. She wears only painties and a pearl necklace which was presented to her a long time ago for her tenth marriage anniversary by her now deceased older sister. Inna Genrichovna's shoulder length white hair is loose. There is not a single window in those rooms so nobody can see her except for the dead ones and if one of them all of a sudden returned to life he would die again after throwing a brief look at Inna Genrichovna's face when she is on guard, taking care of Death's possessions, that being her single true mistress.

In this world hidden below the ground lives She, The One humans above are so afraid of, She comes here to have rest, to stay in silence for a while among the cool air and breathless dreams. Inna Genrihovna serves Her with devotion and sometimes she can hear Death treading quietly or feel on her skin Her tranquil gaze or grasp Her invisible presence in a newly arrived body and then, left alone with that

body, she presses her lips on its arm or chest to kiss the edge of her mistress's dress.

The dead ones are never satisfied even with the best level of care they get. They lie on their shelves properly washed and neatly patched but their faces always express concern and sometimes hatred.

Inna Genrihovna like no one else knows how exquisitely can a dead one express his hatred on his seemingly calm face - it can even get scary. So one has to be rough with them from time to time. Inna Genrihovna certainly doesn't believe in walking dead, a dead one can take a few breaths, whisper a few words, open his eyes and some other things like that but all in all he's just an object, a puppet Death plays with. Therefore Inna Genrihovna sometimes screams at the dead ones, or even punches them with her elbow or her fist, of course not on the mug, because the mug will be sticking out of a coffin.

Inna Genrihovna holds next to a bathtub covered in cellophane, a woman of about fifty years old lies in it, already fully dressed up for an investigative experiment supposed to happen early in the morning. It is Yasha's work, one can tell straight away, because he did her like his own sister, she got ten years younger, her face is calm, and when she came in first she looked so horrible, maw wide open, teeth bared and eyes so angry. He made her a hairdo, painted her lips, added some pink face powder - simply to say milk and blood here and now, like a fresh bride. People say Yasha gets this pink face powder from a circus. Dressed in a suit, flower brooch on its lapel, a white lace blouse, never ever to be taken off her again. Suddenly it seems to Inna Genrihovna that it's herself laying there in the

bathtub and at that moment she hears a knock on the door.

Inna Genrihovna doesn't like that knock. If they brought corpses, they were supposed to call first. On her way she puts on her work robe and turns on the light in the small room at the door. There are two metal tables in it to unload corpses before their temporary return to life.

Inna Genrihovna opens the peephole cover of a heavy prison door and sees a man in a worn out suit and a black hat, he stares her in the eyes with his unkind look and smokes a cigarette. He has a haggard face with deeply cut wrinkles on it.

- Open up please, I'm on business, - says he in a slightly wheezy voice.
- On what sort of business then? - deliberately rudely asks Inna Genrihovna, although she can guess right away on what exact sort.

The man takes out a police ID out of the inner pocket of his jacket and shows it to Inna Genrihovna.

- I'm from the investigative department.
- Young man, so why did you come here in the middle of the night from your investigative department?
- Inna Genrihovna doesn't let it go. - Go away and come back tomorrow. I can't see your ID in the dark anyhow.
- I must get in today, now.
- I can't let you in, young man, it's not a museum.
- I'll pay you, - man puts his ID back into his jacket. - I only need to have a look at one particular corpse. I told you I work in the investigative department.

The man's hand is trembling while he takes a cigarette out of his mouth. Inna Genrihovna sighs and

unbolts the door. Oleg Petrovich enters the room, takes off his hat, puts it on the table and tells his name, patronymic and surname.

- How can I be of an assistance? - asks Inna Genrihovna after examining his ID.
- A girl murdered two days ago was supposed to be delivered to you. She'll be examined tomorrow. Sinitsyna Mariya, - adds Oleg Petrovich, looking at the hostess as she takes a crumpled notebook out of her chest pocket.
- Bullet to the head? - asks Inna Genrihovna, browsing through the cadaver list.
- Exactly.
- Here's your Sinitsyna. She's in the freezer. Come with me.

In the freezer basement Inna Genrihovna right away finds a shelf with a short corpse of Mariya wrapped in cellophane. Inna Genrichovna unzips the crunchy frozen cover and shows her to Oleg Petrovich.

Mariya is gorgeous. She lies as if alive, completely naked and perfectly washed, stretching out smoothly on the shelf, her eyes are closed in a tranquil dream and her face expresses nothing but beauty. Because of death Mariya grew a bit older, her facial features are now absent of childish awkwardness and she has transformed into a pure angel. Mariya's skin is thin and pale like flower petals, her lips are of grayish-blue color, her hair is dark like night grass. Oleg Petrovich slides with his eyes over her blue nipples and stops at her stomach.

- You promised to pay, - reminds him Inna Genrihovna.
- Yes yes, - absently answers Oleg Petrovich, he nears lunacy, feeling like an alpinist who for

the first time is now seeing a shiny snowy mountain top right in front of himself. - I'll pay.

- Perhaps you want to give her a touch? - asks Inna Genrihovna with an explicit rudeness. - It doesn't cost that much.

Oleg Petrovich stretches out his hand and puts it on Mariya's wrist, cold like ice. That cold crushes the illusion of a petite life and the icy breath of the creature that now inhabits the girl's body stings Oleg Petrovich.

- Should I turn her over to the stomach? - asks Inna Genruchovna. - Such a pity they damaged her back a bit during transportation, scratched it on the table's edge.
- No, don't, leave it be, - says Oleg Petrovich putting Mariya's hand back to its place. - I'll take her with me.
- Are you mad? You can't do it, there is an examination tomorrow.
- She can't be examined.
- What do you mean she can't be examined? What's the deal with you, if you want to be alone with her you have enough time. We can even thaw her out.
- No, there's no need for that, don't worry, - says Oleg Petrovich, he pulls a pistol from his belt and quickly, with a click, takes it off safety. - Open your mouth.

Inna Genrihovna takes a dumbfounded look around the walls of the freezer, as if searching for a secret hideout her dear Death is supposed to come out from to protect her from Oleg Petrovich. But then she understands that Death resides inside of the black

barrel pointed at her and opens her mouth. Oleg Petrovich carefully sticks the pistol in there, snapping its barrel against Inna Genrihovna's teeth, and without any wince he pulls the trigger. The shot sounds muffled, a dirty fountain bursts out from the back of her head, and the woman heavily hits the ground like a sack with blood.

- Very well, - says Oleg Petrovich.

He sticks the pistol into his pocket and, in a casual move, wipes his bald head with his hand. Inna Genrihovna lies on the floor, hands spread, and gazes at the ceiling. Oleg Petrovich picks up Mariya and carries her away from the blue cold to the warm night fields.

A large dark rat splits from underneath a concrete beam like blood out of a slightly opened mouth, it dashes along the light strip of a lantern, runs over a crumpled newspaper, along the roadside ditch, merges with shadows and freezes, staring down at the stinky girl with a broad bloody stain on her shirt who lays on her back in a ditch, covered in dust. It waits a bit, then jumps onto girl's tangled dirty hair, cautiously sniffs the air, runs up her cheek and realizes that best way leads into her mouth, for that it moves over to her shoulder, but at that moment a shadow falls over the rat, cold like thin october ice on the pond next by, it squeaks hysterically, jumps out of the ditch on the grass and skedaddles in zigzag into a meadow like a little invisible lightning.

Yulia opens her eyes and sees a face bend over her, broad and pale like a moon, a woman's face with

slanted eyes placed in such a way it's impossible to catch facial features of her nose and cheekbones. Her hair is black like raw oil inside of a milk bottle with a wide neck, freshly from the store, she is dressed in heavily worn-out patched jeans and a t-shirt with some sort of inscription in english, she has strong hands as if she is used to milk cows on a farm and carry heavy cans, dusty torn-up sneakers on her feet. Yulia can't figure out if the woman really exists or she is just an image on the background of a dead world, like a trace of some prehistoric bird on a stone.

- What do you want? - asks Yulia with a wheeze. - Leave me be. I want to die. Let me die.
- Why do you want to die? - asks the woman. Her voice sounds somewhat rough out of vodka and the dusty wind of rural roads.
- Because I'm dead already. I can't stand it anymore.
- And you don't want to see your friend again?
- I don't want to see her anymore. I want to die. I want to disappear forever.
- Get up. We don't have much time.
- I beg you, - plaintively whispers Yulia lowering her eyelids. - I beg you, bring me death.
- She will live again.

Yulia keeps silent. A jet plane rises up into the skies from a far away airfield, shimmering with its toy lights, and the sound of its engines rolls over the grassland making crickets lower their singing.

- Like me? - finally asks Yulia.
- Yes. She'll be full of blood, she'll breathe. She will love you.
- I'm afraid of her, I'm afraid of you all.

- Fear is merely little flowers under your feet.
When autumn comes they will fade away in its cold wind.

Yulia presses her hands in the dust, gets on all fours and sits on her knees. She spots the rat that has returned and is now staying frozen like a gray lump, one step away from her, staring hostilely at Yulia, like at the creature that breaks eternal life pattern.

- Take that rat and bite off its head, - says the woman.

Yulia stretches out her hand, takes the petrified rat and lifts it to her mouth. The animal is paralyzed so its feet are stiff and they don't bend under Yulia's fingers. She takes the last look into its glittery eyes, opens her mouth, sticks the rat's head in it and clenches her teeth. Crumbling spinal cord crack and nasty salty warm blood sprinkles down her throat. And then Yulia begins to perceive in which direction she can find her dead love. She spits out rat's head on the grass and tosses its bloody little corpse on the dusty road.

- Damn you all, - angrily says she, then she stands up and, without shaking off the dust on her clothes, places herself on a back seat of a motorcycle, with both of her hands she grabs the woman from behind in order to avoid falling during the ride. The bike's engine starts in chokes, it warms up and vibrates in a fiery force like a gigantic drill, essence of burned up gasoline soaks through the field air around, they take a u-turn on the road and race forward to the place where wonderful Mariya continues sleeping in her deadly exaltation.

Stars are scattered above them, huge and numb like on the north pole. Yulia puts her head on the Kazakh woman's back and recalls her life, veiled in a cloudy web of time. She remembers her mother, her long hair and dark-crimson robe she wore, the corridor's gloom, illuminated by a shadow of a single night lamp, her mother talks on the phone to whomever it might be - maybe even to the people living in another world, or even for example on the moon, because for the grown ups everything appeared to be possible; mother's hair is loose so they can dry out before the sleep, she doesn't reflect in the mirror, she leans on a burgundy drawer and looks down at the floor, but one can not see anything on it, perhaps it's covered in garden grass like on a datcha of aunt Lida, grasshoppers crawl around there and mazut-colored black apples lie in it, they smell a bit like wine, and the spaniel called Bumblebee stays invisible in the dark because he has died long ago and can not see anymore secret colors of the world he left. However those colours have faded away in Yulia's senses, as if she watches filmstrips in the dark room together with her father, that was her greatest pleasure in the childhood - to sit down obscured in the dark and watch the bright square on the wall, all sorts of fabulous pictures of distant times appear on it, pointed towers, tiled rooftops with curved cat silhouettes, golden weathercocks, silent forests, static and therefore even more mysterious people with old-fashioned faces, as if carved out of wood, given a proper examination - one could almost see tree rings on their cheeks.

Ah, how could she know back then, that little Yulia, that just in a few years the whole world will become

for her even more terrifying than documentary filmstrip pictures with arboreal inscriptions in capital letters, that she will wander alone, pierced by the beams of the darkened sun, among the curtains of an enormous theater, huge as the skies above, and that she will become one of those who still keeps their appearance but is indeed dead since long ago. Does she believe now that she was once alive? That she went to school made out of bricks, learned poems by heart, has been swinging her legs while sitting on a window sill of the second floor, looking at the asphalt underneath, flooded with September sun and covered in colorful poplar leafs, there were people walking on it, their figures distorted by the perspective, she went ice-skating on a rink illuminated by cosmic spotlights - hands in mittens, face burned by winter night frost, - on her twelfth birthday she ate a cherry cake, just to think about it - she is as old as there are months in a year, how could she have known back then that she will stay of the same age forever and the new year will never come again, and there will be no new snow, pristine like silver, and no christmas tree, blazing with its dim scarlet and yellow lights and green magical shadow it casts on the walls. Was it really her, that girl in a white dress who ate with a spoon her cherry cake with twelve thin candles in the middle, was it really her who froze in excitement in front of a box with a present from her parents, she didn't know yet what's inside but she felt - something extraordinarily wonderful, and if it really was her then what force ripped her out from the past, tore her off the pavement, hitting her elbow against the door of a new "Volga", where did this force come from, for twelve

years she knew nothing about it and, already finding herself pressed with her face against the back seat of the car, crunching sand between her teeth, choking, sobbing out of bad pain in her twisted arms, she believed, believed until the last minute that it will pass, that she will wake up, that they will let her go, because it was unfair to kill her when she knew nothing at all about death. And when they tortured her and hurt her by doing the awful thing and hit her and when she went completely numb out of shock and did everything they ordered, she wasn't thinking they will kill her, she wasn't afraid of that, but rather of pain and monstrous unfamiliarity of those things they did to her, for the most part of unfamiliarity, and then the one with moustaches approached her, she was sitting, leaning against the tree trunk, he told her to close her eyes and she closed them, clenching her teeth in pain and sob, then he smashed her head with an ironpiece and she remembers how she managed to open them once again to see him taking a swing for the second hit, the pain was so tearing as if the entire sky above split apart and streams of her blood gushed down from it, as if the air turned into rustling flame and shards of trees pierced between her eyelids, and then she saw her, a slit-eyed Kazakh woman with her sturdy-built body, sitting on the bench in the evening shadow of a rowan bush, and then she began to fall through the earth and the tree and she has been falling until she died.

The motorcycle is roaring like a wild beast, it hits a bump on the poor road surface with its' metal skeleton as if it would try to kick the riders out of its saddle, a warm night wind hits Yulia's face,

blowing through her hair it whirls away in a dense stream, and the motorcycle driver starts to sing a dreary song of kolkhoz² fields, moonshine and untamed rural love. She sings loudly in order to outvoice the roaring engine and it roars even more furious, like it can feel that very dreariness. Yulia looks at the silent fields sprinkled in stars and soaks up that life, so different to her own, haunting tunes of accordion, guys engaged in frenzied fights, knight's tournaments when motorcyclist race towards each other with satanic screams, armed with flails they decide their fate on the spot and blood falls into dust like large drops of a much belated rainstorm.

- I looked, and there before me was a white cloud, and seated on the cloud was one like a son of man with a crown of gold on his head and a sharp sickle in his hand. Then another angel came out of the temple and called in a loud voice to him who was sitting on the cloud, "Take your sickle and reap, because the time to reap has come, for the harvest of the earth is ripe." So he who was seated on the cloud swung his sickle over the earth, and the earth was harvested. Another angel came out of the temple in heaven, and he too had a sharp sickle. Still another angel, who had charge of the fire, came from the altar and called in a loud voice to him who had the sharp sickle, "Take your sharp sickle and gather the clusters of grapes from the earth's vine, because its grapes are ripe." The angel swung his sickle on the earth, gathered its grapes and threw them

² Collective farms created in the Soviet Union as a part of agricultural reforms.

into the great winepress of God's wrath. They were trampled in the winepress outside the city, and blood flowed out of the press, rising as high as the horses' bridles for a distance of one thousand six hundred stadia, - Oleg Petrovich stops, rises his sight from the book pages and drowns it in the darkened watersurface of a bathtub he filled up. - For a distance of one thousand six hundred stadia, - he repeats.

There is a sound of lake water dripping from a loosely closed tap down to the sink's edge. Fisherman flashlight illuminates tight underground space, Oleg Petrovich holds it in his hand over the book. Secret hunter's lair is located in the basement of a country villa, never finished due to the death of its old owner and the lack of finances of the new ones to continue its construction on a required scale. Not much is left from the villa: its ground floor, some basement storage rooms, a sauna hut, a half-planted garden, a mermaid-shaped fountain, like she would pour her jug into a stone basin full of little stones and decayed poplar leaves, and finally a tennis court foundation, resembling remains of an antique public square, overgrown with plantain and fiery nettle. It's dark and scary at night over here, one can hear children crying among the brick ruins, as if dead creatures come over to recall times that were never meant to happen, sounds of music and melodic girly laughter of first-year students drunk on champaign, fireworks over garden, little tables put right on the lawn with pastries and scarlet caviar-smeared sandwiches, twilight mist of a small soundproof sauna, like a pig stall it's full of naked bodies, stuck to each other, they slowly swing in a rhyme of

flowers that are barely disturbed by the flow of their juices.

Oleg Petrovich stares into the dark water, a pale face of Mariya's sleeping beauty shines through it, resting underneath the formalin surface it resembles some magnificent fish, her hair suspended in the darkness like cracks in the thickness of the ice. Mariya isn't naked anymore, she is dressed in a white dress with blue rims on its neckline and around the skirt's edge, Oleg Petrovich bought it in a shop prior to his raid on the morgue. It is a knee-long dress, there are no arms or buttons on its front, and if dried up it would undoubtedly have a lighter shade than now, when it is all soaked dark by the leaden moisture.

- I saw in heaven another great and marvelous sign,
- Oleg Petrovich begins to read again but suddenly stops and listens closely to the night silence. Some sound startles him, it repeats only once, perhaps it was a rat running by or a frog quacking next to the fountain in the garden. The night keeps silence, Oleg Petrovich's heart takes a slower beat on his blood scales, nobody will find him, who would ever think to look for him here, time is on his side, he will keep in hiding until the beauty will fade from the girl's body, then he will bury her in the garden and go under water of a lake nearby, pistol in his mouth and bricks from the villa's backyard in his old backpack, the owner wanted to build a russian sauna out of them, as if a finnish one in the basement wasn't enough for him, and that lake is as deep as a well, there used to be a mine where they extracted salt.

- I saw in heaven another great and marvelous sign: seven angels with the seven last plagues—last, because with them God's wrath is completed, - reads Oleg Petrovich and on the word "plagues" he again barely hears that strange sound, somewhere close, in the basement's corridor, those are rats, they want to eat his Mariya, but they can't reach her body through all these liters of chemical poison.

Oleg Petrovich puts the book down on the floor and walks to the dusty concrete corridor. It's quiet and dark in there. The round-shaped beam of his flashlight looks like a hemisphere map of an unknown planet with its atmosphere made out of lemon gas and clouds of dust, it falls upon the walls covered in cracked flower-patterned tiles, their buds depicted in a simplified manner, like they did on ancient textiles, owners enjoyed such an antique imitation, the garden supposed to be full of naked marble statues, shining white among the greenery like remains of some never-melting snow.

Oleg Petrovich takes the pistol out of his trousers pocket, although he can't see anything living in the darkness he runs his flashlight along the corridor wall towards the stairs that come up from the underground. He hears himself breathing and feels something approaching him right out of the emptiness his flashlight is directed to, he peers into the space illuminated by the flashlight and only at the last moment he turns its beam to the right to spot, no, not a movement but his own death. She squints her narrow-slanted eyes, takes an upward swing and hits him with a metal crowbar on his arm, knocking out his weapon that jumps out to the floor with a clang, pain

snaps at his elbow, but Oleg Petrovich dives down and dodges the incoming blow on his head, he throws himself forward with all his body weight to knock death off her feet, hits her chest with his shoulder, she packpedals, losing her balance and he grabs her hair in order to transform potential energy of her free fall into useful kinetic one of her head smashing against the concrete floor. But somewhere there, halfway towards the free fall, he gets a horrible stab with a butcher knife to his stomach from another side of darkness, in a moment its blade cuts ever deeper through his belly, his hands unclench, he lets go the hair of death and falls into the emptiness, on his knees and hands, a deathly cold sweat breaks out on his bald head, he tries to stand up, but a new crowbar blow reaches his head and a deafening bell toll bursts in his ears, walls around him tear apart like wet cotton and he drops flat on the floor. Yulia jumps on him with a wheezing sort of sigh, from behind she presses his head down with her knees and stabs him a few times in the back like he would be a sofa stuffed with blood vessels, and so she persists to force sharp death into him.

Yulia leaves her knife in the body of Oleg Petrovich, stands up and enters the sauna, pushing away a stool with her foot. She bends over the bathtub, bites on her lip, plunges her hands in the liquid and grabs Mariya by her cold shoulders. Her dreadful, inhuman shriek makes all the dogs in neighbouring villages run for their houses, pain of the dead pierces her through, pain of the dead unmatched by the one of the living. However she lifts Mariya out of the poisonous frost, drags her heavy body to the air and presses it against her chest.

Friend's forehead painfully hits her shoulder, streams of dead water rush down Mariya's dress and hair, they drag her by the shoulders and legs towards the lake, put her on the grass and undress her, the slit-eyed one slices up her dress and panties with a knife. Mariya is getting submersed in the water like a little dolphin they found on a meadow, bubbles come out of her nose, they douse her, then lift her up and turn over to the stomach, the slit-eyed one begins to pump Mariya's chest, squeezing out dirty water out of her nose and mouth. Yulia silently cries out of pity to Mariya's heavy body, to her tangled hair that drops loose around the shoulders, to her naked arms that lie by the sides and to her suspended head, the slit-eyed one has to raise it by the hair to let the water flow out.

After that they put Mariya ashore, arms spread out, the slit-eyed one unhooks a bag from the motorcycle and takes out a syringe, it sparkles in the light of a single shore lantern, her strong fingers of a nurse quickly attach a needle to it. Yulia takes hair off Mariya's face and stretches out her naked arm, palm up. She feels no sting and watches the needle piercing under her skin and the syringe getting filled with slowly creeping darkness. The slit-eyed one takes out the needle and a drop of mercury runs out of an indistinguishable little hole on Yulia's arm. After checking Mariya's chest under her left nipple, the slit-eyed one places the syringe at the spot and forces it inside with a crunching sound, Yulia winces in pain which Mariya can not feel in her thick anaesthesia of death. Slowly, millimeter by millimeter darkness enters Mariya's body that doesn't even twitch, she's simply lying still with her

sleeping face upwards, like a rag-doll, and Yulia gets even more scared of how very much dead she is. That procedure is repeated a few more times, only Mariya's chest doesn't crunch anymore, as if her heart, drunk on Yuilia's blood, already lost its virginity.

Then they pour some gasoline over a pile of tree branches next to Mariya, make a fire and sit down waiting with their legs stretched out to the flame and their sleepless eyes that stare into it without blinking. From time to time the slit-eyed one begins to sing in a low-voice, swinging her head side to side, the language of these songs remains unknown to Yulia, probably they were born in some distant land unfamiliar to her, where nobody managed to set their foot, and Yulia contemplates that maybe it is indeed the land of the dead, who live there singing their songs, and the ones who couldn't get there suffer in strange ennui and nostalgia over their unknown Homeland.

Yulia is sleeping eyes opened, and she is dreaming herself walking through some fields that burn without smoke, she goes towards a huge pale-blue moon, hovering right above the horizon, the flame doesn't burn her feet, it grows around like grass and leaves, inside the fire shrubbery strange creatures loom to Yulia, made out of flame and so dissimilar to the earthly beings. The moon is getting closer and ever bigger, she can see azure mountains covered in azure snow, blue oceans, a wind rises amidst the fiery fields, sprouts of flame fly up into the cobalt skies full of stars and Yulia whispers, she doesn't know to whom: "Lord, how great is Your creation and how truly boundless it is."

She can see as the slit-eyed one stands up from time to time, lifts Mariya up by the underarms and vigorously shakes the girl, her outstretched arms waving in the air, her limp head dangling helplessly. Yulia dreams of light-colored lilac trees and children's voices, they pull a cart behind them through the pathways of the eternal garden. A tempest is brewing, she must run to the school to hide herself from the rain, it's Sunday today, the school is empty of people, there are only brightly lit hallways and the smell of putty, classrooms' doors are wide opened, like in a pioneer camp when everybody has gone to the beach, azure sea splashes its surf behind the tall windows, snow-white seagulls soar above in the air, Yulia opens the window and looks down the rocky cliff, you have been given wings and wings are for flying, for what else indeed. And she flies, approaching the water surface that gleams in the sun, the surface she has been always afraid of when she looked at it while leaning over the boat's railing, because beneath this beauty hides merciless depth of death, this time she pierces right through it and finds herself on the other side, in the world hidden from humans with its own sky and sun in the clouds. "Lord, how great is Your creation and how truly boundless it is."

The slit-eyed one wakes her up already at dawn, it's light outside and the stars have already lost their brilliancy.

- Dawn is coming, I must go - says she.

Yulia looks at Mariya's lifeless body, spread out on the grass and covered with a bloody jacket that they took off slaughtered Oleg Petrovich.

- We'll move her to the ruins, and best of all you should lay on top of her to warm her up.
- She's not awake yet, - Yulia shakes her head. - Where're you going?
- I can't stay up in the morning. I hate the sun.
- It's not really that sunny in the ruins, - Yulia tries to protest, but she catches the cold sight of those slit eyes and falls silent.
- Sun isn't just light, sun means pain, - hisses the slit-eyed one. - I can't hide from it anywhere, even underground. Grab her by the feet.

They drag Mariya into the ruins the same way they dragged her out at night. The slit-eyed one first puts Mariya on the concrete floor, then she lays a jacket next to her and finally places Mariya on top of it.

- Now lie down on her, - orders she to Yulia. - Unbutton your shirt and lie down with your belly. Now remember: Frunze street number five, apartment eight.

Yulia obediently unbuttons her shirt and tears it apart on the spot where it got all stuck together with dried up blood, then she lays down with her belly on Mariya's naked body. She is amazed that Mariya's chest and belly are slightly warmer than her legs Yulia carried her by. She hugs her girlfriend and presses herself against her body, tucking her face in the cool cheek. With her lips she can feel the ear, it feels like a little cold pancake, and she breathes on it. The slit-eyed one leaves and soon one can hear the angry barking of her motorcycle. "So where's she heading, - thinks Yulia, - if she can't hide from the sun even underground?"

The walls turn grey, it is morning. There, above, the sun has probably already fully risen, but Yulia doesn't feel its warmth. Together with Mariya they are dead and dead is everything around them: dead stones of the crumbled walls that stand on the cliffedge of time, of no use to anyone anymore, dead grass caught in a tide of the last autumn, morning dew appears on it like deathly sweat, dead birds, lying still in the grass, the weight of death has flattened their bodies, even their feathers stay motionless in the wind, dead bees, they lie in between grass stalks like dried up breadcrumbs, dead clouds, merely carried further by the wind, as if a river would carry corpses of people fallen in a battle. Yulia's eyes don't close, reflecting the moving sky above, in her solitude she witnesses the slowly incoming end of everything, she is alone on a far-away planet, once alive, it got derailed off the timeline, but what for, I ask You, what for does my love live when everything around has already died?

She keeps lying like that for a long time, it seems like eternity, above her cars drive past the ruins, the sun shifts shadows around the trees, the wind above the lake blows clouds of dust of no origin and no source, rats rustle in the underground depth and scratch the concrete, a swarm of flies buzzes above the body of Oleg Petrovich, all the earthly creepers crawl out of their cracks for a feast, but it doesn't matter to Yulia, she lies still and hugs her Mariya.

Then it quickly gets darker. A bitter gust of wind sweeps into the underground a cloud of whitish dust. Sounds dissolve in the droning draft, at once Yulia is awoken and she presses herself to Mariya's body even harder, turning away her face from the air flow,

full of sand needles. First thunderclap shakes the invisible sky and that particularly fine concrete dust falls from it, as if plaster would peel off the ceiling, the wind catches and carries its ribbons into the lake, it knocks birds out of the air and they scream in futile. The approaching giant roars again in fury and turmoil, and here, far ahead of him, the rustling wall of rain rises upwards as if from the earth itself. Suddenly Yulia is entangled in a strange sort of fear, she is even shaking and clenching her teeth, sounds of thunder become ever louder and closer, finally in a horrible crash the sky unfolds above the ruins like a huge golden door, Yulia curls up and hides her face in Mariya's hair, the earth underneath her shudders but doesn't crack open, because it's the largest thing in existence, the blind earth, full of worms, roots and buried corpses, filled with its own sort of black and slow forms of life, it's bigger than the skies and the sun in those skies. Yulia feels its bottomless depth like her own home, filled with clay and stones, I can escape deep into you and you will hide me from the death stars. They won't be able to see me and I will not die.

Underneath her Mariya makes a move. Yulia startles, she can feel a subtle movement underneath, it's a dusty wind gently entering Mariya's chest. Here, now again. Yulia gets up so she won't hamper Mariya's weak breath and turns Mariya's face towards her. For a while it stays dead, pale flashes of lightnings reflect on it, all of a sudden it distorts in pain, her head throws back and Mariya's body begins to squirm brutally, a sobbing wheeze comes out of her half-opened mouth, her eyes open and blindly stare at

Yulia, they are full of horror. She recalls her death.

Mariya presses her clenched hands to the chest, screams and shakes her head in order to turn away from the horror, but it finds her everywhere, from all around it looks her straight into eyes, she screams once again and starts to cry helplessly. She is alive.

Now lightning is striking somewhere far away but the rain is still crawling over the grass. Yulia kisses Mariya on the lips, on the soft nose, on the wet eyes. She tenderly calls her by the name, presses against her cheeks, she is so happy that Mariya is alive again.

- You're the only thing, the only thing that I got.

Tired of the painful torment, Mariya quiets down and looks at the ceiling, listening to the repetitive sound of rain. From time to time her body jerks as if it still wouldn't believe its own existence.

- I'm hungry, - finally whispers she, one can hear her wheezing throat is clogged with some things unnecessary for life.

She leans on her elbows, gets on all four and crawls to the corpse of Oleg Petrovich, she grabs his jacket with both of her hands, manages to turn over his heavy body on the stomach, putting a scare on the buzzing swarm of flies, then she uses her force to tear out the knife out of the back of Oleg Petrovich like a firmly planted mushroom, she cuts open the corpse's clothes along the spine and starts to slice off meat stripes from it. Oleg Petrovich's skin bursts open and lets out the water mixed with black blood that his body has collected. Mariya winces in compassion towards another person's pain, she tears

the meat with her hands and lays the pieces out on the hunter's leg. He doesn't move and simply keeps on lying still and heavy like a pork carcass on a shop counter and Mariya can sense now that he is completely dead. She continues slicing, the death of Oleg Petrovich she perceives as a part of herself, she is scared yet she keeps quiet, then together with Yulia they begin to eat sweet rotten human flesh, they cut off pieces the size of a match box, she rises her eyes to the ceiling, rain rustles on the earth above it, and then she says:

- I was afraid that I'd die one day. Now I'm even more afraid. Aren't you?
- I already got used to it, - answers Yulia. - You'll get used too. One can't be afraid all the time.
- Before I was afraid I'd get killed, I remember I dreamt often as somebody grabs me by the neck from behind and begins to choke, or that I'm sinking and somebody is dragging me underwater with his toothless mouth, and now I have a strange fear: I'm afraid they'll eat me just as I am, won't even kill me before.
- Better don't think about it. One can quit thinking such things.
- Well maybe it's true?
- Maybe.

They continue eating in silence.

The rain is about to stop, but twilight has already sneaked in. Sounds become ever quieter in this condensing darkness, one can only hear the crickets chirping, finally waiting enough for the rain to stop.

It gets ever darker and hotter until the night arrives. Girls exit the dungeon and pass through the nettle bushes, Yulia takes off her clothes and they bathe in the lake, the black water is cold and Mariya's fever passes. High-rises glow with their windows in the distance, like scattered yellow stars, a plane flies above them in the darkness of the skies, it hums quietly and blinks steadily with its red light. When Mariya gets out to the shore and begins to wring out her hair, she smells field flowers and remembers herself being alive for a second. The memory is so vivid that Mariya freezes with her hair in the hand and shuts her eyes tight, all things around her appear to be a dream, a nightmare she will wake up in a moment and go back to the place where the sun is warm and time flows in its regular stream, not just staying in frozen clouds among the azure shades of eternal skies.

- We can't stay here long, - Yulia whispers to her while standing in a non-stingy nettle bush. Although nobody could hear them anyhow. - The slit-eyed one gave me an address, but it's really far away. First thing we should get you some clothes, you aren't gonna walk through the whole city naked are you. My classmate from the past life lives here nearby, I'll go to her and you wait here. Here, take the gun. Can you shoot?
- Yes, - says Mariya who only in her life shot plastic balls from a toy gun.
- Hide yourself and only shoot as a last resort. I love you.

They hug and press their lips against each other. Then Yulie leaves along the lake towards the high-rises, Mariya sits down in a dog ditch under the

wall of the ruin, tucks her knees in her face and waits for the friend, gazing at the darkness above the water. She sees that there are no fish in it, merely an insentient mass of water covering the bottom overgrown in seaweed with bones of sunken animals and humans resting on it. The lake emerged from an abandoned construction pit, rains have washed away its bottom and an underground spring has broken through, dead earthly water has filled the emptiness, it extruded the air only to create an even bigger emptiness that wouldn't allow breathing birds or mice in, and is only suitable for resting remains and rotten fallen leaves.

Yulia returns carrying a wrap with Mariya's clothes. Jeans, socks, t-shirt and waterproof blue jacket. While Mariya dresses up Yulia washes her hands and face in the lake and combs the hair with her fingers. Then she takes something out of the pocket, holds it on her palm and rinses it in the water. Mariya bends down and recognizes human teeth.

- Did you kill them?
- Not all of them, - answers Yulia. - I killed mother and brother. Her, I tied to the radiator and turned on the gas. There're some of her teeth I have here as well, I plucked them out with a knife while she was still breathing.
- What do you need them for?
- I just like them. Are you ready? Come, let's go.

Revolution

Young linden are blooming all along Frunze street. First windows already glow in the morning twilight, a phantom silhouette of some sleepy woman wearing a bathrobe appears in one of them, she yawns, fixes her hair and turns on the stove to make breakfast. Yulia finds the house she needs in the depth of a warped courtyard with a few cars parked in it and a withered old man who is walking his small dog in a sandbox. The hallway smells after old cat feces and damp basement bricks, lights are off and green walls rise upwards into the deliberately excessive height, one can look up through a wide staircase gap and see a barred window out of thick opaque bathroom-type glass that spills out dim morning light. The door to apartment eight is black and shabby, the doorbell gives no sound and Yulia has to knock for a long time.

The door opens on a chain. In the darkness of a cluttered corridor hides a wrinkly hag, so hideous that Mariya wants to kill her right there on the spot, just out of spite to the pathetic life clinging she chose for her lot. Hag's eyes are murky, her lower lids are hanging down like nasty sacks, her nose resembles a beak of an ugly bird, her toothless mouth is pursed like a wrinkly clot, as if preventing some disgusting liquid from oozing out of her head. With her left hand the hag grips and leans on a stick that keeps her from dying, she wears a nightie and is wrapped in a thick terry robe with a big hole on its side.

- Hi, - says Yulia to the hag, We're here from the slit eyed one.

For a while the hag meticulously inspects girls, sucking with her lips on the invisible breast of emptiness.

- Kill the father of yours, kill the mother of yours, - finally she spits out at Mariya in a wheezing quack. - Eat their brains, obtain the power. Then you'll know yourself what to do next.
- Grandma, do you have teeth? - asks Yulia.
- I don't. Get lost, - the hag slams the door.
- Remember your address? - Yulia asks Mariya. Mariya nods.
- We'll be back! - loudly whispers Yulia into the keyhole of apartment eight. - Wait for us, grandma.

In her home courtyard Mariya feels pain on the inside as if time itself turns backwards and presses on her with a beak of its pencil-shaped mug. She recognizes her homy hallway, its door chipped from the bottom, a broken dusty window on the first staircase, cracked in the corner, and a flower pot in the second floor window with lace curtains in the background. She walks up the stairs like she used to for so many times when coming back from school, rubbing those steps with her backpack's bottom, so many times in winter she dragged up her wet clanky sled and every time someone died she would find here scattered funeral flowers. She enters the elevator, its walls scratched up with nail drawings, and presses the scorched melted button of her floor, nothing has changed here since she was gone, as if it all took place merely yesterday, but so many things have happened in that time, she even managed to die.

While ringing the bell of her door Mariya recalls her fear of the father and can not feel it again anymore, the horror of her previous life appears to be nothing compared to the new horror death brought her. The doorbell sounds harshly inside of the halfway sleepy flat, the peephole blinks in a moment, overshadowed from the inside, then the locks click and Mariya sees her mother.

Mother can't make any sound, she simply looks at Mariya helplessly, then she stretches out her arms, Mariya steps over the threshold and hugs mother's body, burying her face into the sheep-textured robe, mother is breathing with her chest and her belly right under Mariya's face, the womb she came from.

- Who is it? - asks father's voice from the kitchen.
- It's Mariya, - quietly answers mother and begins to cry, realizing that her daughter has indeed returned home.

Father comes out to the corridor, squats next to Mariya, tears her off the mother, presses her to himself, hugs and kisses her a few times on the face.

- Sweetheart, - he says. - And we thought you'll never come home again. Where have you been?
- One evil man has locked us up but we managed to escape from him, - says Yulia. - He made us undress and imitate the sounds of animals and birds.
- Such a horror, - sighs mother. - You must be hungry, - she jumps up and rushes to the kitchen, wiping up her tears.
- Thank god, - repeats father squeezing Mariya ever harder, - thank god you're back, darling. Go wash your hands and we'll have breakfast.

He loosens the embrace and Mariya takes a close up look at his face, broad and irradiant with power that she is supposed to obtain. He stands up and smiles at her and she smiles back because she loves her father for all the torment he brought upon her, she has been loving him before and continues loving him with the sort of masochistic children's love that can only be directed at parents for any terror they inflict will be forgiven because the mysterious terror of birth is of the higher order. She turns around and walks through the corridor to the bathroom, it seems to her she'll start crying right there and nothing really happened and everything will go back to normal, she stops at the threshold, opens the door and before she manages to switch the light - the ice-cold water of fear rushes out of darkness all over her and she clearly realizes: they are here already, those who want to eat her. They are here although she can't see them, she is dead and the curse of dead lies upon her, she is prohibited to live, yet she lives still and for that they want to punish her, punish her in such a horrific manner one can not even imagine. She is prohibited to live by the law of The Universe and there is no worse crime than breaking that law.

Mariya slowly extends her hand and presses the light switch, the bathroom light turns on. Nobody is in there, just a white bathtub, a sink, metal faucets, towels, objects of different colors and shapes creating an illusion of life that doesn't exist anymore. Mariya goes in, turns on the water and starts washing her hands and face. The door squeaks and she sees her father standing there on the threshold. Looking in his eyes and smiling she grabs

his crotch with her wet hand and pulls him by the trousers towards herself.

- Close the door, daddy, - whispers she. - I'll suck you off.

His face expresses embarrassment but he doesn't take her hand off the trousers, and then Mariya unbuttons and lowers them together with the underpants, kneeling herself in front of him.

- Close the door, daddy, - repeats she and kisses her father's penis, swipes along it with her tongue.

The door bolt slides shut, the penis gets bigger and harder, Mariya puts it in her mouth as deep as she can, clenches her teeth in all her might and tears it towards herself. Father yells fiercely and ferociously like a massive herbivore, with his hands he tries to push Mariya away, but she continues the tearing, gulping on the salty blood that gushed into her mouth, she tears and growls like a hound until finally one powerful kick throws her to the side, she drops to the tiled floor hitting her shoulder on the bathtub's edge, pulls a pistol out of her jacket, points it at her father and pulls the trigger. A roaring blast jerks her elbow backwards so she almost drops the weapon, father falls back through the doorway, grabbing at his crotch, a blood stain spreading on his chest. Mariya stands up, grips the pistol with both hands and shoots at his head but misses, the bullet hits the door frame, lying on his back, father kicks Mariya, trying to knock the pistol out of her hand, then she takes a wild shot roughly at his torso and hits the shoulder and finally, on the fourth time, she shoots him through the head,

right away father drops off to the wall, shudders for a second and calms down.

Deafed by all the shots, Mariya opens the door and steps out to the corridor, her mother ran down from the kitchen and is now standing there with a mop in her hand. As not to see her face anymore Mariya shoots on the spot point blank, the shot pierces through mother's mouth and punches deeper into the head, throwing back her body. She slaps her arm on the corridor wall and falls down to the floor. There she begins to twitch, sucking in the blood that flows out of her mouth. Mariya takes a step forward, carefully aims at mother's temple, exposed between her untangled hair, and presses the trigger, but the pistol doesn't shoot because it's out of bullets.

- Finish her with a knife, - says Yulia, she steps next to Mariya and offers her a knife. Mariya takes it and kneels on linoleum next to her mother's body that squirms in pain. - Go for the throat, - suggests Yulia. - Cut it.

Mariya puts the pistol on the floor, grabs mother by the robe's collar, pulls it at herself and takes a slash on her throat, crossing it sideways with a bloody stripe. You presented me dolls for my birthdays, you washed my hair over the sink, you baked me pastries with apple jam. Mother wheezes and jerks even harder, looking at Mariya with her eyes that are for some reason full of tears, a stripe on her throat thickens, soaking with fresh blood.

- Cut deeper, - says Yulia. - I'll go look for an axe.

Mariya turns her face away, blindly grabs mother by the hair with one hand and puts the blade to her throat with the other one. Mother clenches at

Mariya's elbows, gurgles with blood, yanks like a fish and freezes on the floor. Mariya tears her elbows out of mother's hands, staggers to her feet and leans with her back against the corridor wall. She watches blankly as Mariya chops up mother's head with crunching axe strikes, a wide blood puddle has leaked all around it, the bloody squash-like brain bubbles out of the hole in the head into Yulia's cupped hand - like thick tar out of a splitted tree bark.

- Eat, - says Yulia, offering Mariya a handful.

Mariya snaps at the brain with her teeth like a cat and swallows it effectively without chewing.

Her head starts to hurt because of the smell, it spins and she feels drunk, savagely gorging out of Yulia's hands she presses herself tightly against the wall with her back and palms of her hands. After that they take off their pants, place themselves down into the blood puddle and eat the brain, picking its pieces out of the corpse's head. There is a radio playing in the kitchen and the water Mariya forgot to turn off pouring out of the bathroom tap. When the mother's head is completely scooped out they go to the bathroom to the father's corpse. Together they pull it to the wall and give it a halfway sitting position, for a second his head drops to the side but Yulia bends it forward and takes a cracking swing on its crown, and then another one. They take out skull pieces and begin to snatch the brain out of the hole so big that Mariya can stick her whole hand in it. Mariya wants to vomit, she takes a faint burp but carries on greedily munching the brain, she can see her face reflecting in the mirror, smeared with sticky blood. Yulia is the first one to eat her fill

to the state of drunkenness, she begins to giggle, smudging the brain on her face and tossing its pieces against the bathroom wall, watching their splashes slowly slide down. Mariya feels very nauseous and she drinks cold raw water out of the tap, putting her face under its flow because the headache is getting ever worse.

After drinking she becomes frolicky for some reason, takes a knife from the corridor and starts slicing father's legs right through trouser's cloth, observing the blood, then together with Yulia they begin to kiss and rub each other's genitals and nobody can ban them from doing so because Mariya's parents are dead and there aren't any brains left in their heads. They suck blood out of each other's forearms, squirming out of contracting and painful convulsions, they giggle, gurgle with blood and oink like piglets to draw an even funnier picture. In the middle of this feast the breached entry door snaps open and soldier's boots start stomping through the flat.

- Freeze, drop the weapon! - somebody screams in the corridor. - The building is surrounded!

Mariya pulls up her panties and exits the bathroom.

- Girl, get down to the ground and don't move! - yells to her a man in uniform, crouching behind the shoe cabinet. The second man sneaks along the corridor wall towards Mariya. The third one hides behind the broken door frame. All have pistols in their hands. Mariya keeps looking at the sneaky one and suddenly realizes the nature of her diabolic power.

"Shoot yourself in the face", - pronounces she inside of her head. He has dark hair and stubbled

pointy chin. "Shoot yourself in the face", - calmly repeats Mariya. The stubbed one breathes steadily, firmly gripping at his pistol. The other two are looking at him with concern as he stops for no reason. "To the nose, - thinks Mariya, - to the nose". The stubbed one takes a careful step forwards, then all of a sudden he abruptly raises the pistol and shoots himself in the face. He jerks violently, gushing out blood, and in a second he falls to the back, arms spread. Another soldier appears swiftly from the depth of the staircase, the one who was crouching behind the cabinet jumps up and rushes forward along another wall, the one who was hiding behind the frame takes his place, the fourth one takes a peek from the corridor's corner. Mariya quickly sits down on the floor, pressing her back against the bathroom's outer wall.

- Twenty six! - yells the one now crouching behind the shoe cabinet. - Gusev, cover me!

He runs down the corridor, slams his body against the wall next to mariya and kicks out the toilet door. "Kill, kill, kill, kill", - repeats Mariya in her mind non stop, shutting her eyes in fear. The soldier crawls along the wall, steps over Mariya, places his hand on the door frame already prepared to storm in, and at this moment everything around Mariya explodes in shooting, she covers her face with her hands and curls up, a heavy man's body drops on her from above with a wheeze, a mirror shatters, bullets popping against the walls, somebody wounded howling, he crushes tabourets in the kitchen and then suddenly comes the silence, disturbed only by that howl. Mariya takes her hands off her face and sees the winner, a blonde and tanned soldier, he stands tall

next to the door frame, points his hand to the kitchen and takes a shot, the howl cuts short. The blonde one swaps his target for Mariya but is incapable to shoot, instead he walks towards her along the corridor, stepping on corpses on his way, he approaches and continues aiming right at the girl's face. He holds on in front of her, inside of his eyes there is only the air of summer meadows. This is the one soldier that came in from the staircase, all the others are already dead, he stands alone, not even wounded, his body free of lead and pain. Mariya takes a pistol, dropped to the floor by that one who stormed the bathroom. The blonde one kneels down next to her and looks in her eyes. With his hand he strokes Mariya's naked legs smeared in blood and moves in to kiss her, she offers him her mouth, touches his tongue with hers, breaks off the kiss and tenderly bites on his chin. He wants to kiss her again but instead of her mouth she introduces him to the pistol barrel, she sticks it in his mouth, he wraps his lips around it and she presses the trigger. The blonde one drops down, thrown back by the bullet and Mariya wipes hot drops of blood off her cheek. Only then she notices that Yulia is already out of the kitchen.

- Slut, - says Yulia and makes an offended face.

Mariya laughs, throwing her head backwards, Yulia laughs as well, they giggle in the stillness as the raised dust settles and blood springs flow out of bodies scattered all around the floor. It seems to them that nothing can stop them now.

Having laughed heartily they gather up pistols and clips into Mariya's school backpack she finds on the same spot she dropped it such a long time ago as she

had run away from home. They stick in their pockets one pistol each. Yulia peeks out of the window and sees two cars and a grey van parked in the courtyard. They quickly clean themselves up and leave the flat. When they encounter another two spetsnaz³ soldiers ambushing in the staircase Mariya carefully puts her backpack on the floor and lifts her hands up, then Mariya kills them like in a movie, with a couple of headshots. Soldiers drop dead and roll down the stairs colliding with each other. Their deaths amuse Mariya to such a degree she bends down next to one of them, dips her fingers in blood that flows out of his shattered face and licks them. Blood is warm and fresh, in its saltiness it appears tasty to Mariya, reminding her of a salted tomato juice. Yulia walks down the stairs, she pushes Mariya's shoulder forwards with a heavy backpack and Mariya leaves the bodies without even picking up their weapons.

On the first floor next to the post boxes they meet a moustached spetsnaz soldier with greyish hair, who can sense his incoming death very well and he shoots Yulia in her leg right on the spot. The bullet knocks Yulia off the steps, she falls down and grabs at the railing. The moustached one shoots the wall, bulging out his fish-eyes, his face engorges with blood, he keeps shooting on and on until he is out of bullets. Then Mariya takes her pistol out of the jacket and shoots him in the throat. The moustached one doesn't drop to the floor right away, so great is the power of his professional hatred, he keeps standing and looking at the wall shredded with bullets, then he leans with his back against the blue post boxes and emits a wheezing roar like a wounded elk. Blasts

³ Special task forces.

sound from somewhere down the last flight, bullets whistle through the air in front of Mariya, fly upwards, hit the ceiling and sprinkle pieces of plaster over her. Pressing herself against the elevator doors, Yulia shoots the moustached one through the head, he quits roaring and falls on his back, hitting the floor hard with his entire body weight.

- Does it hurt? - Mariya asks her friend, taking a few steps to the wall towards her.

Yulia briefly shakes her head and laughs. As if on command at once they rush forward, screaming furiously on their way and shooting the shadows that lurk in the hallway gloom. A counter bullet blazes through Mariya's shoulder, she feels a powerful blow, but instead of pain there comes merely burning and an unpleasant tension of a foreign body inside her flesh, it appears much bigger than bullets can be. She gets thrown back to the wall but she continues pulling the trigger even if there are no more bullets in it and all the scenery in front of her has already hushed, a prostrated body lies still in the dark, filled with death air like an astronaut, now it's even hard to distinguish was he young or old.

Yulia gives her another pistol and Mariya puts the empty one on the steps next by. Yulia is wounded to her side, somewhat below her chest, her clothes are getting soaked in slowly oozing blood. She smiles at Mariya and slides another clip in the pistol.

- We'll kill them, my bunny. We'll kill them all, - tenderly says she and blows away the hair off her slightly tired face.

They walk down towards the entry door, stepping over the body on the floor. On their way Mariya's shoe

catches a warm fountain of blood that erupts out of a shredded artery, she instinctively jerks her foot away like she did in her childhood when she was afraid of stepping into a puddle and wet her shoes.

- Tell them not to shoot and come out, - says Yulia, ducking behind the shut door leaf.

- Please don't shoot! - plaintively yells Mariya.

She opens the door and steps on the hallway threshold, the sun has come out from behind the morning clouds and is now shining right in her face. She walks on the asphalt, looking around and pressing her hands tightly against her chest to conceal the pistol. She can only spot two soldiers, one is taking cover behind the bumper of a passenger car, another one hides on the van's seat, the third car is empty. Mariya goes between them, scanning for danger with her eyes, but nobody is looking at her, spetsnaz men keep their eyes on the entry, the one in the van quietly talks on the radio.

- Please don't shoot, my friend is in there, - begs Mariya the guy behind the car bumper although she can shoot him point blank.

It's sunlight that detracts from her dark anger to kill, she feels tired while breathing in clear morning air and wishes to put everything behind her. Yulia exits the hallway, carrying a backpack with her, when the radio-talking one sees her wounded he gives a short command and an ambulance drives in from another side of the courtyard. He gives commands, thinks Mariya, but he doesn't know yet that all his men inside are dead. She tucks the pistol into the inner pocket of her jacket and inspects her wounded shoulder. Fabric on that spot is pierced with a torn up hole but there is little blood so Mariya calmly

walks towards the ambulance, inhaling unfamiliar light air. The wind begins to rise, a rustling newspaper flies along the sidewalk and sticks to a lamppost. Two medics rush out of the car, a man and a woman, they carry a stretcher for Yulia who crumbles to the ground in exhaustion, her backpack falls to the side. Mariya picks it up and gets into the car behind the stretcher. Nobody tries to stop her. The ambulance backpedals, turns around and switches on its howling siren. It shudders on an asphalt pothole and rapidly gains speed. The female medic bends over Yulia with a bandage, the male one cracks open an ampoule and sticks a syringe needle into transparent liquid in it. Mariya yanks out the pistol, presses its barrel to the back of his head and shoots the bending medic. Bloody mash spills over the floor like vomit. The medic drops forwards and Mariya points the gun at the woman.

- Stop the car! - yells she, trying to outvoice the howling siren.

The woman gives her a paralyzed stare, she fails to keep herself upright on the next turn and falls to the side, grabbing at the railing. Yulia as well takes out a pistol and points it right at her face.

- Tell them to stop the car! - again yells Mariya and sits down on the bunk.

The woman shifts her gaze to the murdered medic and starts banging on the backside glass of the cabin. The car decelerates and takes right, towards the sidewalk.

- Take a pillow! - screams Yulia at the woman, - and press it to your face!

The woman takes the pillow but doesn't press it to her face and simply continues holding it in front of herself with both hands.

- Press it to your face! - repeats Yulia.

The car stops. The woman shuts her eyes tight and puts the pillow to her nose, concealing her face. Yulia forces her pistol's barrel into the pillow and takes a muffed shot. Feathers blow out of the pillow, the woman falls backwards and jerks with her naked legs with slippers on her feet. The siren cuts off and the driver's face appears in the backside glass, trying to see what is going on in the car's interior. Mariya shoots him from the side, aiming across the interior, the bullet breaks the glass and his face drops out of sight. Yulia picks up the pillow, wraps it around her pistol arm, smashes broken glass with her elbow, pokes out into the cabin and finishes the dropped person with two shots through the pillow.

- Let's go, - abruptly says she while throwing away the pillow and sticking the pistol behind her jeans waistband.

Mariya opens back doors, picks up her backpack and gets out to the sidewalk. The wind sweeps through her hair, revealing a large bruise on the spot she was shot through and killed by Oleg Petrovich. Following Mariya, Yulia exits the car. Two bypassing women halt and look at them. Mariya turns around, crosses the driving lanes of the side-street they stopped at and runs along its other edge, Yulia's shoes tramp behind her, after that they turn into a pass-through courtyard, run behind the garbage store and stop, leaning on its brick wall still moist from yesterday's rain.

- It was such a slaughter, - recalls Yulia smiling, she wipes the sweat off her face with her backhand.
- We should probably change our clothes, - says Mariya, - everything's soaked in blood, we can't walk around like this.
- Let's pay someone a visit, - suggests Yulia. - Some of your friends surely live around here. Pity we don't have silencers for our pistols.
- Don't have what?
- Silencers, such things one can screw on the barrel and then the shots become almost completely noiseless like a knee-clap. Sounds cool, right?

Police sirens howl behind the houses from all the directions as if cars summon each other into a pack, up for a big hunt.

- I know a place with plenty of clothes! - all of a sudden grasps Mariya. - And it's very close. Let's go.
- What place? - asks Yulia behind her back.
- My school.

- Assholes! - barks out Ignat Ilyich and bangs his fist on the table with such a force that a folder stack slides sideways all over the table surface, a ballpen jumps up and a telephone receiver of one out of two phones at the table side janks out. Spetsnaz sergeant stands at attention in front of him, continuously and blindly staring at the wall behind Ignat Ilyich, like there wouldn't be merely dried up in bubbles peeling paint in front of him, but a window and inside of it - a

slender woman wearing short dress and walking down an endless sunny alleyway.

- How many are killed? I ask you bastard how many're killed?
- Eight, comrade lieutenant-colonel.
- I didn't hear you!
- Eight, sir lieutenant-colonel.
- Who shot them? Who killed my men I ask you! Bring me Ryaborukov.
- Ryaborukov is dead, sir lieutenant-colonel.
- Sonofabitch! - screams Intat Ilyich, his powerful voice shakes the walls of his office. His meaty neck swells up and becomes even thicker and furious sweat appears on his clean-shaven head. - Ryaborukov went through Afghanistan, he was worthy all of you combined! Who could've killed him if even the Talibs couldn't?!

Ignat Ilyich presses his mighty fists at the table and lifts his heavy body up from the armchair. His sandy moustache sticks out on his face and appears to be his only facial hair, taking in account the invisibility of his light and sparse eyebrows.

- What is the current situation? - he asks the sergeant, separating the words, pronouncing them quietly and slowly, and because of his shining ice-cold glance the sergeant feels uneasy.
- Samoilov's squad is ready for the task, sir lieutenant-colonel.
- I'll go myself. Tell Golokov to be there in twenty minutes. Go on.

The sergeant turns around and leaves, carefully shutting the door behind himself. Ignat Ilyich stares blindly in front of himself, thinking and reflecting at the scale of the disaster that broke out on this

tender May morning, a wrinkle takes form on on his forehead, polished by the sun and the wind of military polygons, he bares his teeth and emits a low guttural growl.

The spacious school hallway is illuminated by the shining sun through its windows. Corridors between classrooms smell like putty and a light wind breezes between opened windows. The first lesson is still ongoing. While Mariya inspects the lesson timetable on the wall, Yulia is focused on a wall newspaper, feeling the schoolchildren's pictures with her fingertips, glued to the paper they're surrounded by the felt-pen colorings. Mariya stands by the timetable for a long time, for some reason she can't find her class, something is disrupting her ability to concentrate and remember the way one searches for classes in the timetable. Wind rustles through the poplar branches outside, merrily chirping sparrows have returned from garbage containers in the neighbouring courtyard. Finally Mariya manages to find the classroom number and remembers that now they have a double lesson of Russian language. Girls take the stairs to the third floor.

The corridor with classroom doors has its floor dotted with diamond-shaped spots of golden light, so very blinding - one can't see any putty that covers the floorboards. The walls are painted in sky-blue and the doors are white like milk. They enter the bathroom to wash their faces. Over here it's gloomy, the light can barely pierce through the non-transparent glass, brown rough tiles cover the floor, some spilled water by the sink. Mariya washes

her face with her hands, takes off the jacket and checks the wound on her shoulder. All of a sudden a chain rattles inside of one of two cubicles and the flush water gushes down the toilet with a wheeze. The cubicle's door opens and out of it comes Lena Astahova. She freezes on the spot, her silver-grey eyes open wide in surprise, meeting Mariya's round-shaped dark ones at point-blank range.

- Sinitsyna? - asks she in doubt.

Mariya doesn't respond and continues staring at her classmate, and because of that stare Lena suddenly gets so scared - she even shrieks against her will.

- Undress, - abruptly orders Mariya. - Take off your dress.

- Are you mad? - asks Lena.

But Mariya's facial expression tells her she is not joking. Lena tries to keep calm and shifts her gaze at Yulia, shrugs and tries to pass by Mariya, then Yulia pushes her hard against the wall, takes a swing and punches her in the teeth. Lena falls to the wall with her back, holds at her face, moans and slides along the tiles down to the floor.

- Undress or I'll stab you, - quietly says Yulia and pulls out a knife.

Lena stands up, leaning on the wall with her spread fingers, her broken lip shivers, light-colored blood flows out of it. Constantly keeping her eyes on a knife blade she clumsily takes off her dress over the head and gives it to Yulia.

- How about panties? - quietly asks she.

- Keep'em, - tells Yulia and passes the dress to Mariya.

She takes off her pants and bloody t-shirt, rolls them up and proceeds to the sink in order to wash off

the blood from her chest and legs. Lena keeps standing mutely by the wall, holding at her broken lips. Finally Mariya puts on the dress which is somewhat tight for her. She adjusts it at narrow parts and drops off her shoes, walks to Lena barefoot and watches her shaking.

- How come your skirt's so short? - asks her Mariya. - I'll be ashamed to wear it. Take off the shoes.

Lena obediently takes the shoes off her feet and steps with her white socks on the cold tiled floor.

- Now get on all four, - says Mariya.
- What for?
- Let's play little sheep.
- I don't want to, - says Lena just in case, not expecting any good from Mariya's newly invented game.
- But I do. And Yulia does as well. Yulia, do you like playing little sheep?

Yulia nods.

- Quick, get on all four, we're getting bored.

Lena sits down and spreads her hands on the floor.

- It's dirty here, - says she, looking up at Mariya.
- It's alright. You're a little sheep after all and sheep walk on all four. Here you go. Now walk to the window and bleat like a sheep.
- Please don't, - asks Lena and begins to cry. Mariya slightly steps on her fingers and Lena jerks her hand away.
- Go to the window. If you won't show us little sheep we'll get angry.

Lena crawls to the window and cries silently.

- Bleat! - reminds her Mariya.

- Ba, - says Lena.
- Bleat like a sheep I said!
- B-a-a-a, - quietly whimpers Lena, one can hear her choking on tears.
- Here you go, now you're a true little sheep, - laughs Mariya while walking next to Lena in her shoes. - Turn right. Open the door. There's your stall, little sheep. There's your water. Drink it.
- I don't want to!
- You're a little sheep now and you must drink out of a bucket.
- I won't drink it, I don't want to, not out of the toilet, - moans Lena in a breaking voice.
- Yes you will, - Mariya approaches Lena, grabs her by the hair and sticks her face to the toilet.

Lena washed her hair in the morning, they are soft and silky, at the same time Mariya puts her knee on Lena's back and presses down with her whole bodyweight, Lena squirms and moos underneath her with a muffled sound. Mariya takes off her knee, lifts Lena's choking wet face by the hair and bashes it against the toilet again and again. Lena faints, her eyes roll back, blood flows out of her smashed nose. Mariya looks at her as if trying to remember something.

- Yulia, - tells Mariya. - Time to slaughter this little sheep.

Yulia squeezes into the narrow cubicle and stabs Lena in the throat. Mariya holds the victim so that a blood stream can pour down the toilet. Yulia locks the door from the inside and they take turns putting their mouth under the stream and drinking light-colored fresh blood. Maria feels intoxicating

lightness, pulls Lena with her chest onto the toilet, leans at the wall and closes her eyes. Then the school bell rings.

They wait out the pause inside of the cubicle, on the outside they hear unsuspecting school girls laughing, somebody flushes the toilet in the next cubicle, Lena keeps lying still, head down, hair spread over her naked arms that touch the floor, a small watch glitter in gold on one of them. Mariya stares at the peeling paint above like she used to when sitting on the toilet, back when she was studying in school, it appears to be so long ago, entire lifetime has passed since but actually it was quite recently.

When things quiet down they sneak out of their hideout and leave slaughtered Lena alone to drop her blood into white vastness of sewers where it will dissolve into water streams that rush through the pipes, it will quit belonging to Lena alone and will instead become food for all sorts of black woodlouses and little bugs along with microscopic brown grass and other small but helpful living creatures.

Mariya opens the classroom door with a pistol in her hand, even her dead heart stops with that sort of school fear she got when returning back after being ill for a while, afraid that many things have changed in her absence and now she'll be unable to understand anything. Tamara Vasilyevna, Russian language teacher, is standing at the board, on it there is a long complex sentence written in her round large handwriting, predicates are underlined with two parallel lines that Tamara Vasilevna draws by hand even clearer than using a ruler. Tamara Vasilyevna stares at Mariya in silence, not knowing what to say,

Mariya concludes she has nothing to say and takes a loud shot to woman's head, fracturing her glasses, Tamara Vasilyevna's plump body falls backwards, on the way down her head and her back hit the wall next to the blackboard with a muffled sound. Teacher's blood splashes over the board but remains invisible on it because the board is brown.

After her carcass drops dead there comes such a silence over the classroom, one can hear pupils breathing. Nobody makes a move. Mariya sits down behind Tamara Vasilyevna's table with a textbook and a short pencil on top of it, she puts her pistol in front of herself and only then she turns her gaze to her ex-classmates. Their faces express blunt and pale fear. Yulia shuts the door and squats next to the wall, throwing back her head. Mariya removes her unruly hair from the face and sees the slit-eyed one she never met before, standing knee-deep in sand on the twilight shore someplace so very far away, only Mariya can see it. Slit-eyed one's face closes in at Mariya, or it's Mariya closing in at the face, its faint skin emerges ever more clearly out of the twilight, her eyes' and mouth's slits unfold ever wider, the air falls into them as if being sucked in by the infinite vacuum.

Know - I contempt the ones weak in spirit, those stinky sheep, blindly moaning out of hunger in their stalls.

Alike I contempt the ones who cry and beg for mercy, there will be no mercy and there is nobody who can save them.

I hate the meekness, because right next to the meek one there is another one torturing him like cattle.

I know as well not to forgive anybody, because you will never be forgiven even for the things you never did.

One must make his heart into a room with no light and hide that heart more carefully than any intimate part of his body because there is true shame sitting in it and if one merely tries to open it - everybody will laugh at him.

If somebody lends his helping hand - cut it with a knife because he wants to push you into your grave or pull you into his own with him.

Verily I say to you - those helping hands are poisonous, death poison is on their palms.

Nothing is sweeter than blood and destruction of the things created.

It is so easy to destroy the creation, so where is the power of the creator after all?

Verily I say to you - the children will surpass their parents.

There is no reason to search for complicated because death acts in simple.

Rise and kill them, bring them death!

Mariya became very tired and for a while she sits motionless with her eyes shut. She opens them again and looks at children's faces, mindless and blank, they surely understand nothing of those things Mariya does. But time is up and there is no time left to reach the understanding. She stands up from behind the table. Metal chairs rumble as children stand up as well, ready to follow her. Two or three of them stay in their places but nobody pays them any attention because they're dead.

First the 6th "A" class goes downstairs to the crafts room with an ongoing lesson for boys. The teacher is a cigarette-stinking thin man called Evgeny Stanislavovich, he is missing a finger on one of his hands, it has been bitten off in prehistoric times by a lathe. Children knock at the door, he obeys the calling and steps out to the corridor, immediately Mariya stabs him in the stomach. Evgeny Stanislavovich sits down by the wall and moans, death is a difficult process for an elderly person, Gena Pestov kicks him in the face, jumps atop of him, like schoolchildren do when they play, and starts choking him with a wrench. Evgeny Stanislavovich twitches and wheezes, gently trying to grab Gena's hair, his kindness wouldn't allow him hurting the boy, but his wiry tenacious body doesn't want to give in to death. The other ones don't wait for this tedious struggle to end, they enter the classroom and find there about a dozen high school students, Mariya orders them to put away their instruments and stand by the wall. Children pick up their weapons: rasps, hammers, axes and metal pliers. One of the seniors tries to resist and Mariya shoots him through the leg without any warning, the boy falls down and squirms on the floor gripping at the spot the bullet took a chunk of.

- Rip to shreds! - suddenly shouts out Mariya, her face becomes very pale and freezes up, teeth grinning.

The armed squad of her minions howls and dashes at the students pressed against the wall, the bloodbath commences. One of the seniors twists a hammer out of Misha Ostroverhov's arm, kicks him away and smashes Zoya Pavlova on her head. Zoya drops down with her face splashed with flowing blood. Yulia is on time,

she violently stabs that senior in the back, he shrieks in pain and the second stab makes him double over to the floor. Misha Ostroverhov pierces another senior with an awl running down at him full speed, another one is simply taken down to the floor and murdered with rasps. Valya Zabuzhskaya emits a faint squeal and jumps at her victim, clawing and ripping his face, he screams and tries to tear Valya off, both of them fall down, the senior miserably hits the wall with the back of his head and begins to twitch under wailing Valya, trying to wrestle away his torn up face. Mariya can already see the wings of victory beating close, so she grabs Petya Perepelkin, armed with a high caliber chisel, and drags him out to the corridor.

Two of them break into a gym next door. Right away Mariya finds the teacher, Valery Nikolaevich, standing by the wall, he is a tall man wearing track pants, sneakers and a light t-shirt, she aims with both of her hands and shoots him, the shot echoes remarkably loud under the vaults of the hall. Valery Nikolaevich falls on his back, children of 5th "B" scatter in panic, some of them start running right at Mariya, like a herd of maddened animals, she shoots them point blank, shuddering out of pistol recoil, some boy by inertia crashes to her feet, hitting her shins with his head, she backpedals, loses balance, slips and falls backwards, Petya hits a girl that tries to run past them with a chisel to her face, she wails and takes a step back, covering her face, stumbles over a bench, Petya rushes forwards and gives her a skillful kick to the stomach that knocks her off the feet, he falls down atop of her and sticks his weapon in her chest with a dull chomping

sound. Mariya stands up and inserts a new clip into the pistol. She breathes steadily and audibly, with her mouth slightly opened. The remaining children huddle against the gym wall.

- Meat goes to the hallway, - she orders Petya, nodding at the dead. When she spots Yulia entering through the door, she points her finger at the huddled herd of 5th graders and rapidly runs the same hand across her throat.
- Rip to shreds! - yells Yulia and races into the gym, pupils of 6th "A" follow her armed with all sorts of metalworking tools.

They drag children to the hallway, spike them with awls and then kill them with blows to the heads, a squeal rises up, at the same time Mariya, accompanied by a few members of her pack, runs downstairs, to the first floor in order to capture junior pupils, Mariya knows that grown ups feels sorry for them the most. Downstairs they catch the moment of nascent panic: lessons have stopped, teachers of junior classes scurry along the hallway. Mariya has to begin her shooting.

Before the eyes of kids from 1st "B" she kills with a pistol shot to the chest their teacher Olga Davydovna, after that she commands the 1st graders to leave their backpacks and school supplies and come out of the classroom. From the next door Misha Ostroverhov and Olena Korc take out to the hallway 2nd "B", abandoned by their teacher. Terrified children crowd together by the windows, somebody runs along the hallway in a desperate attempt to save themselves, some fragile girl takes a look at teacher's corpse and faints, Gena catches a blonde boy who tried to bounce to the side and cracks his

head open with a rasp, the boy falls down, blood flows out of his head, little girls begin to shriek, hiding behind each other and only with great difficulty they get driven upstairs, some try to escape, Misha catches a braided girl by the hand and pierces her throat with an awl, blood sprinkles over the wall in a thin and splashy stream as if somebody killed a cat.

They chase the kids into the gym, like a sheep herd, and make them sit down. Seeing blood splattered all over the shiny floor somebody starts to vomit, the smell of child puke spreads through the air. Mariya steps out to the hallway and finds there the 5th graders' corpses, boys and girls in sport suits, lying side by side, she blindly stares at naked girls' feet, dressed in black and blue sweatpants now soaked in blood, meanwhile the carnage continues already at the end of the hallway, this time it's the 7th "A" getting murdered, their breakthrough out of the physics classroom has failed, Mariya rushes to the slaughter, a door to her side opens and some boy jumps out to the hallway, Mariya shoots him point blank so he won't knock her off the feet, the boy gets thrown backwards to the wall and he falls down, legs swinging through the air, the next one in line takes a step back and slams the door. Mariya makes her way further, she can hear a gunshot behind the wall, probably Yulia has finally found and finished the physics teacher, Oleg Sarkovsky lies next to the radiator, head cracked against its corner, his mouth is opened and his hand still grips the rasp. A few 7th graders' bodies are lying in blood puddles next to the classroom door, one boy is spread atop of a girl, her skirt got shamelessly lifted up when she

fell, her face is turned away from Mariya, one can't even tell what exactly killed her, boy's school jacket is pierced from behind with an awl, blood flows out of his wounds, only distinguishable in its wet glitter on the dark-brown jacket.

The massacre inside of the classroom goes on, someone's body drops down from the table to the floor, Valya Zabuzhskaya emits a rapid shriek, furiously striking her target, somebody's head gets smashed against the wall, the wounded ones wheeze in pain, Mariya understands that the victory on this frontline is already hers and races forwards to the darkened vestibule, past the toilets and to the staircase, a group of students is running down from the upper floors, she leans against the wall, takes the pistol with both of her hands and stretches them in front of herself like she did before, her shot bursts someone's head, he drops to the floor and children trip over him, Mariya shoots again and then her reinforcement arrives just in time and rushes into battle with a hysterical howl.

- Tear to shreds! - viciously yells Mariya, taking a swing with the pistol's handle against some boy's forehead.

Petya Perepelkin drives his chisel through the stomach of the 8th grade girl, but gets knocked off his feet. Misha Ostroverhov pulls an awl out of someone's body and stabs again, wounded girls begin to squeal sharply out of pain. Olena Korc grabs one of the staggered senior girls by the hair and violently jerks her down on the awl to rip open her belly. The running stream falters on the stairs, the back line pushes forward, but the front ones start to crawl back, leaving behind blood stains and dead

bodies. Petya Perepelkin got roughed up by their shoes, he stands up, lips broken and forehead swollen from the blow, he roars and jumps at the squirming crowd, using his chisel to cripple their bodies, dumbfounded in terror. Mariya spots among the backpedaling mass some teacher and takes a few shots at him without even aiming properly, bullets kill a skinny girl who has been confusedly clutching at her unzipped backpack, she can't drop to the floor, squeezed by the shoulders from all sides and the next shots blow off her face, the back line rushes up the stairs with inhuman howl, they stumble and fall, someone's hand gets stepped on, a heart-rending screech continues with a fight, the strong ones are furiously making their way up, Mariya's warriors climb after crowd and collect the bloody harvest.

- Rip to shreds! - howls Mariya, pressing her back against the railing and rolling her eyes. Yulia appears next to her, her body is covered in blood just like her knife.
- I gave the pistol to Popov, - she shouts to Mariya over the shrill screams of the killed ones. - The second one I gave to Gorky. What an awesome hunt!
- We got to barricade both stairs with desks! Save your ammo! - Mariya yells at Popov who just ran out of the classroom and point-blank shot the 7th grade girl already spread on the floor.

The boys under the command of Gorky begin pulling the bloody desks out of the classroom and jam the staircase with them. Yulia calls back the climbing ones and sends them to the second stairs with the same task, the escape from the upper floors is about to resume through it. Soon one can hear her

thundering shots from that direction. Mariya enters the classroom and sees that she has lost another two: Ira Potockaya lies on the floor by the window, blood flows out of some place on the back of her head, frozen eyes fixed on the ceiling. Valya Zabuzhskaya rests inside the desk with one leg up, her face completely smashed. All around the floor there are dead 7th graders, somebody emits a faint moan, one boy has lost all his shame because of pain, he has unzipped his pants and is now inspecting his belly, ripped open with a knife all the way down to the genitals. Mariya doesn't shoot, she knows the boy will be dead soon anyhow.

Battle roar from another stairs slowly quiets down. Mariya gathers her class in the hallway next to the gym. Pupils of 6th "A" sit down along the walls, all covered in blood like little predators, they breathe quickly and unevenly. Corpses of school children murdered by rasps are scattered all around the corridor in pools of blood. Mariya sits down on a window sill, her face is sprinkled with blood as if she would be a cat.

- Now we'll divide into squads, - says she. - Every squad will have its own commander: Yulia Zaitseva, Volodya Popov, Gena Pestov, Misha Ostroverhov.

She splits the children into groups, pointing at their faces one after the other. Those she calls up - stand up and move closer to their commander. When Mariya goes silent there are only a few children still sitting by the wall: Vika Lihovtseva, Shura Ravkina and Borya Savin, they don't belong to any squad. Now everybody can see that they aren't smeared in blood at all and both girls are unarmed.

- These are cowards, - quietly says Mariya, pointing at them.

Vika Lihovtseva quickly jumps up and starts running down the hallway. Yulia raises her pistol but Mariya stops her hand.

- I'll do it myself.

She stares at Vika's back and when she reaches the second to last window in the hallway Mariya sharply yanks her head. Vika falls to the side and hits herself against the wall, then she stands up and hobbles forwards, again she falls down, this time on her belly, not even trying to protect herself, one can hear her body crunch as it hits the floor flatwise. Borya Savin squirms by the wall after getting an awl stab to his side, Kolya Egubov squats down next to him and takes a few dull sounding swings with his rasp to Borya's head. Borya bleeds heavily, twitches a bit facing the wall and quiets down. Children drag whining Shura Ravkina to Mariya, her face is all clawed by girls. Mariya gently runs her index finger over Shura's face. Tender in its dread it resembles pale flower petals. Somebody violently stabs her with an awl from behind, so hard that the girl shudders and shrieks in pain, then again and again like a wind-up doll pricked by a needle.

- Popov, go get Lihovtseva, - orders Mariya. - And bring these ones into the classroom.

Popov approaches Vika, grabs her arm and pulls her body on the putty towards Mariya, Vika's paralyzed legs drag over the floor.

- Well, you almost ran away didn't you, eh? - asks Mariya while looking into brown eyes wide with horror.

- Marishechka, - whispers Vika with her numb lips.
- Have mercy, Marishechka.

Everybody can see Vika shaking violently and they smell her urine.

- Stand up, - tells her Mariya. - Look me in the eye. Let her go, Popov.

Vika can barely stand, everything inside of her hurts after plunging on the floor but she tries to stand upright. Tears flow out of her eyes and she lowers her face, even now ashamed of her crying.

- Look me in the eye, - tenderly repeats Mariya.

Vika wipes her tears and looks into Mariya's eyes, new tears appear instead of the old ones and again she wipes them, her lips trembling in sobbing spasms. Vika's hand freezes at her cheek and now tears can roll down freely, she doesn't wipe them anymore and simply stares at Mariya. Suddenly Vika takes a clumsy step back and drops down, arms spread, crimson blood ribbon squirts out of her mouth as she goes down. Her body hits the floor and remains motionless.

- Did you see how I killed her? - says Mariya while turning to face her classmates. - I flooded her brain with blood. It's my favorite way, - she sighs and looks at the ceiling. - Gena Pestov will guard the children in the gym. Don't hurt them, we'll need them soon. Throw all the corpses from this floor out of the windows.

May wind

There is a biology classroom on the opposite side of the hallway. In the glass cabinet inside biology teacher Nadezhda Aleksandrovna has been collecting all sorts of visual exhibits for years: stuffed squirrels, rats, mice, sparrows and finches, dried fishes and pinned insects, bugs and butterflies. From the inner side the cabinet walls are decorated with appliques cut out of colored paper depicting leaves and blades of grass, all made a few years ago by Nadezhda Aleksandrovna's favorite pupil - Lida Ryabkina, in that time they got dusty and a bit yellowish because of ageing of a poor quality glue, but biology teacher liked them a lot, for her they were visual exhibits as well, resembling skin and hair of Lida Ryabkina herself that stayed forever in the glass cabinet. As soon as they encountered some exhibit from the cabinet in their learning material, even briefly, mentioned indirectly, right away Nadezhda Aleksandrovna rushed to her treasury, slid the glass door to the side and reached for a beloved object, nervously stroking a dead creature with her thin fingers, giving it a sigh and gently blowing off the dust, in such moments just as many times before she would tell the students about Lida Ryabkina and her personality, her little gifted hands, inside of those palms the love to biology has been blooming once upon a time, the kind of which nobody has these days anymore, not even Lida herself, she grew up long time ago and is now living somewhere far away with her grown up and completely detached life.

Squad leaders take places behind the first two desks by the window, Mariya sits in the place of Nadezhda Aleksandrovna, who, luckily for her, got a day off and didn't come to school on the Revolution day. Mariya looks in the window, behind it there is a school fence, poplar tree trunks, people crowding behind the fence, blue-white police cars and ambulance vans driving up with their sirens blinking.

- We don't have much time, - says she. - They'll probably attack soon. Our goal is to reach the rooftop.

At ten past ten rings the bell from the second lesson. A window on the second floor gets opened, glaring for a second with its glass, and Yulia Zaitseva appears on the sill. In front of her lies the outer school yard, children's belongings that were dropped in panic are scattered all over it, a couple of open backpacks, abandoned text- and notebooks, large blots of blood, as if dropped out of an inkpot. Right ahead, behind the narrow gate that splits the fence there stands a military bus, behind him - five police cars, behind them - an empty street, and then - brick houses with warmed up sunny rooftops, slim cross-shaped antennas, and further - the skies, and nothing behind those skies anymore.

- I want to speak to you, - loudly pronounces she.

There stands a massive man in military clothing, his clean-shaven head glints smoothly under the wind and steady sun rays that fall upon it. His eyes are light-colored and his face has simple structure, his tanned neck is thick. That is Ignat Ilyich.

- Speak, - he quietly allows Yulia, carefully inspecting blood on her skin and her clothes.
- We have forty junior pupils. If you attack or even try to approach the school, we'll start killing them, - says Yulia.
- What for? - asks Ignat Ilyich while calmly staring at Yulia's face.
- Just like that, - answers him Yulia evenly calmly.
- And if I kill you? - asks Ignat Ilyich.
- You won't kill me, - claims Yulia.
- I will, - speaks Ignat Ilyich in a wheezing tone.
- You won't.
- I will.
- Nope.
- I will. I'll kill you, you little filth.

Gena Pestov appears in the window next to Yulia, he holds by the shoulders a terrified first-grader, a girl with two blonde braids. The sun reflection across the glass blinds Ignat Ilyich from seeing properly and he squints like a wild animal. Gena lifts up the girl and places her in front of himself on the sill. The girl is afraid and tries to grip Gena's hands but all at once he strongly pushes her forward. First-grader flies out of the window, arms and legs wide spread in the air like a frog, and falls to the ground, her chest hits it with a quiet crackling sound and she remains still, one leg twisted to the side as if she fell asleep on a huge stone bed. Yulia and Gena retreat to the inside. Two soldiers run to the girl and find out that she is dead, non-living blood already flowing out of her mouth.

At ten fifteen (time being tracked with a salad-green watch on the wrist of Olya Korc) Mariya releases her pack to the third floor. Six-graders climb over desks piled up across the staircase and emit hideous squeals. Those squeals frighten guys from senior grades gathered behind the barricades, they stare in horror at children's mugs covered in blood and brown rasps in their hands.

- Tear to shreds, tear to shreds! - howls Mariya from the staircase while bending in a peculiar way, as if having a stomach seizure. Her face is terrifying. - Tear to shreds!
- Tear to shreds! - roars the attacking pack.
- Get them! - a rough man's voice falls from someplace upstairs. It's Genady Nikolaevich, school's military instructor who organized the defence. He stands proud atop the barricade, holding a piece of broken desk in his veiny hand.
- Get'em guys! - shouts the instructor.

And the battle commences.

Petya Perepyolkin with his faithful chisel is the first one to climb the wall. Genady Nikolaevich swings at him with a piece of desk but Petya dodges it, howls like an animal and hits with his chisel on instructor's knee. Genady Nikolaevich yells and falls back, someone of the seniors pushes Petya's shoulder, he loses the balance on the skewed desk tops and crashes backwards. Lenya Kashkin uses both of his hands and takes a rasp blow at the defender, but the iron clanks against the raised desk leg, a tall guy surges above Lenya and punches him in the ear, Lenya drops forwards and gets choked and smashed in the face by strong senior's hands, tramped by their

putty-smeared boots that crush Lenya's nose and lips with a barely distinguishable chomping sound. The pack gets stuck at the edge of the barricade. Olya Korc gets hit with a stick on her hand, drops the rasp, regroups in midair and falls through the barricade, clenching her teeth in pain. Kolya Saskovec roars, jumps on the tall guy and sticks an awl in his belly, somebody grabs Kolya by the hair and throws him with the head against the radiator, he tries to keep himself standing but hits the ribbed metal and falls down as well, meanwhile the wounded senior sits on the floor and quietly moans in pain. At this moment Volodya Popov finally manages to stand tall on the barricade and shoot one of the defenders out of his pistol, a guy without jacket, wearing light chequered shirt gets it to the chest, blood gushes out of the wound, the guy takes a step back, seniors to his sides recoil from the injured one, and Misha Ostroverhov together with Yulia storm the newly-appeared defence gap. Yulia wheezes and manages to dodge a punch to the face, she slices open someone's belly with her knife, viciously bites at the hand someone tried to grab her hair with, and continues frantically carving living bodies left and right. Misha plunges an awl into enemy's hip, receives a knee-kick to the face, drops down in stagger and gets kicked again already while lying on the floor. Another gunshot and another guy falls backwards, here comes the panic. Genady Nikolaevich can't do anything already for a while, he is standing by the wall, wincing in pain that crushes his skull, he rubs against the wall with his back and tramples on a spot like a mating grouse. He can see Mariya, doubled over by the staircase window, invisible

behind the barricade, she gazes at him with her round eyes, mouth opened, saliva drools out of it, he is a rooster and she is a chick, then a colourless stone wave washes over Genady Nikolaevich and cracks open his forehead.

- Tear to shreds! - ferociously shrieks Mariya after slaying her main enemy.
- Tear to shreds! - yells Yulia while stabbing to the back some plummy senior who turned away to escape.

The knife blade slides into a fatty body like into a sweet pie.

The defence is broken.

The pack charges into the body mass jammed in the hallway, rasps thump over the skulls, senior girls shriek while getting pierced by awls, at the entry of one classroom the battle flares up with a renewed vigor, somebody blocks the door with a desk, a blow of its tabletop smashes out teeth of Natasha Borowa, Misha Brusatkin gets hit with a cue-shaped wooden pointer to the face, Vitya Gorky grabs someone's hand with tongs, an inhuman howl cuts through frenzied noise of the slaughter, again and again hoarse children throats scream out hysterically:

- Tear to shreds! Tear to shreds!

Another shot blast, it throws a pale-faced guy back into the classroom, somebody covers his face and turns away to the window, Yulia jumps at the desk, on the way she slashes a throat of some plummy soft girl who tried to squeeze to the wall, Kolya Saskovec jumps at another one with big deer-like eyes, stabs her with an awl, together they fall down to the floor and he tears up his victim who squirms in pain, he gets under her dress to stab again and again, but she

can only squeal miserably and tuck her legs in arousal over harsh bites of the iron sting, suddenly somebody shrieks and dives out of the window, someone else follows, one after the other they jump out. One can hear the sounds of chase stomps in the hallway and the squeal of wounded on the floor being finished off, someone's head is getting smashed against the parquet with a dull knocking sound, shot blasts sound from another staircase and then comes the roar of 10th graders rushing to a deadly attack.

When the main pack finally breaks through the hallway - the barricade is already lost. 10th grader's corpses and their moaning wounded ones are scattered over the stairs, the main bulk managed to escape downwards, to freedom. Zhenya Palkina lies right atop of the shoved desks, clinging to the crowbar she picked up from the wooden fire box on the wall, her disfigured face is directed towards the unreachable ceiling, her mouth and nose are smashed. Down from the barricade on the steps lies trampled Misha Ostroverhov, a stream of blood flows out of his body, but his fist still clenches at the pistol, Misha's clothes are all wrinkled and covered in ribbed footprint patterns of rubbed putty, his second hand is twisted, palm upwards, its fingers are crushed till blood. Further down, Vitya Polushaev spreads on the flight, his hammer, knocked out of his hand, has slid under the radiator, probably the crowd had been dragging Vitya downwards, killing his child's body for a while till they finally tossed him against the wall and cracked open boy's head. Behind the desks that have been kicked away to the territory of the revolutionary second floor sits Lida Popugaeva

and wipes up her bleeding mouth, they had no time to kill her and simply punched her in the face.

- Scumbags, - hisses Mariya wiping the sweat from her forehead with her fingers. Then she rubs her fingers on the dress. - Take alive everyone who's left.

There are no more than a dozen alive ones left on the third floor. Mainly those are senior grade girls, they sit on the hallway floor by the wall, pale out of nausea and stink like vomit, one slender blonde has already fainted.

- The rest escaped upstairs, - tells Yilia to Mariya while bending down to clean her knife on the skirt of a dead girl under her feet. The girl lies down as if on a beach, illuminated by the black sun, she turned her face to the wall in boredom. - There's another barricade.

Mariya looks over the pack that encircles them. Everybody is breathing heavily, angry bloody faces are so tense with exhaustion - their skin is about to burst.

- I'll go alone and you watch the windows for any guests, - decides she.

Mariya calmly walks the stairs up to the last floor. One of her hands carefully slides along the railing.

She stops in the middle of the last staircase. Entrenched students can see her now in all her glory, round-eyed, face splattered, hair disheveled and glued together with crimson moist, naked legs underneath her short skirt all smeared in dried up scarlet streaks, it looks as if huge death truck has sprayed Mariya with blood from underneath its heavy grooved wheel.

- Blood doesn't flow anymore, - speaks out Mariya.
- Let us go upstairs and you can leave. Look, I have no weapon, - she stretches out both of her hands, palms up. Palms covered in dried blood.
- You're lying, you've got pistols, - says a senior from upstairs.
- We're almost out of bullets, - guiltily smiles Mariya. - We're tired of killing, we just want to go upstairs.
- Hey, I know her, it's Marisha Sinitsyna! - exclaims a girly voice from behind the blockage.
- It's me, Galya Hvostova from the 6th "B"!
- Hello, - answers Mariya. - I promise nobody'll touch you.

A broad-shouldered boy with an iron piece of a desk in his hand climbs over the barricade. He grabs Mariya by the wrist and turns backwards.

- Let's go guys. If things go wrong I'll kill her.

A few more seniors climb over the blockage. Among them is a tall girl with long chestnut hair.

- You'll kill her and then what? - calmly asks she.
- Maybe they don't care about her at all.
- No, - says another guy, thin and sweaty, wearing a jacket without buttons. - She's in charge.
- Her? - surprisingly asks the broad-shouldered one. - This one?
- That's right, - confirms the sweaty one. - She orders and others execute. There's another, a red-haired one as well, she's also in charge.
- Let's go, - decides the broad-shouldered one.

A group of schoolchildren gets out to the stairs and walks down the steps. Up front there're a few seniors armed with iron and wood, right behind them the broad-shouldered one leads Mariya. The staircase

overflows with the knocking sound of shoe soles, there're more and more of them and it seems the stream of walking children is endless. On the third floor their way is blocked by the demolished barricade with Volodya Popov, Yulia and Kolya Saskovec standing atop of it. The rest of the pack is gathering behind them. Yulia spots captive Mariya, growls and takes a step forward, clutching a knife in her hand.

- Let them all through! - says Mariya loudly. -
I'll be back soon.

The broad-shouldered one sharply jerks Mariya by her hand directing her downstairs, her hair flutters among dark school jackets, and then Yulia understands that Mariya goes to her death, like Jesus Christ. She stands up on the desk to her full height, red-haired, pale-faced, wearing non-school clothes, jeans stained in blood, knife in her hand, full of deadly force and eternal love of hers but she can't do anything, except to bite on her lower lip and let tears grow in her eyes, to grow and to drop, to flow down her cheeks. For what reason is she doing that?

Yulia wants to scream, she wants to ask departing Mariya why she is going for her death, why their freedom turned out to be such a short-lived dream. But she understands that she must keep silent and cry in silence while standing on this riverbank, and there are no more flower meadows, overshadowed by drifting clouds, but merely the impenetrable dark forest of death growing all around her.

Fresh air blows over Mariya's face, free of the stench of blood and vomit that she has been living with inside the school building. Wind rustles through poplar crowns, stretched out to the sky, petal rain

falls from white blooming cherry trees. So very high above in the sky the sun burns in its infernal fire, cloaking behind floating clouds, laundry on the balconies of nearby houses flutters like flags in the air. Clear forgotten joy enters Mariya's heart.

- Let's run! - she pulls the broad-shouldered one behind herself forwards, to the glittery car windows, fresh grass on the lawns, scarlet irises scattered over the flower beds of regular geometrical shapes, white stripes across the asphalt outlining eternal areas and to poplar trunks with young swat soldiers of Ignat Ilyich drowsing behind them, ducking, leaning against the tree bark, chiseled assault rifles in their hands.

And they run. The others shout at them to stop, but they continue running, all of them, big and small ones, inhaling the sunny wind, some even laugh and their eyes widen in unearthly happiness for they have already earned their freedom and for that they didn't have to torment themselves for all those long years when the dreary rains are falling and the eyes lose their coloration like drawings on a brick wall. Tall men come out from behind tree trunks to meet them, they have risen as if finally shedding off the control of their unresolved mysteries, they straighten their shoulders and open fire at the running human wave.

Somebody drops in front of Mariya like a sheaf, she stumbles, hits the asphalt with her knees, the broad-shouldered one lets her off and bullets pierce through his body like invisible needles pierce the warlock, he twitches because of bullet hits and falls down to the ground, to the feet of the running ones,

a long-haired girl kneels next to him and screams, gripping at his jacket covered with scorched holes, in a moment a bullet hits her accurately in the face, jerks her head back and drops her down, Mariya notices how the running ones're turning left, behind the fence, many bend down to take cover from the shots, the fence crackles under heavy fire, stone dust rises above it like smoke, bullets clang against the asphalt, some girl screams desperately and rushes around amongst the fiery stings, they can't manage to hit her, Mariya gets up and crawls on her skinned knees behind the tree, a boy from 6th "B" is already lying down on the grass next to it, eyes glazed, mouth opened, short bursts continue blasting over her head, a girl screeches, curled up next to the curb and wounded to the stomach she yanks her legs and soon that screech remains the only sound in the morning stillness.

Troops silently pass through the gate, keeping their aim at school windows. Surviving schoolchildren that lay on the lawn or just on the asphalt are ordered in swear language to get up and go to the cars.

The ones that can't get up by themselves are lifted up by force, the dead ones are turned over by soldiers' feet. Screeching girl gets grabbed in the arms and dragged somewhere, she tucks her naked bloodied legs to keep her shredded belly from splitting apart, one can see her white panties. Short commands bark around. A tall punisher appears over Mariya who sits in the grass behind the poplar trunk, the sleeves of his tunic are rolled up. He looks into her round eyes, raises his AK and points its barrel at the girl's face.

- Do you know what this thing is? - quietly asks he Mariya. His mouth twists as he speaks because one of its corners is sort of frozen. - I'll shoot you.

Mariya shudders and tucks her scraped knees.

- You've probably wet yourself in fear, eh? - asks the punisher and snuffles, taking a better sniff.
 - Well tell me, did you wet yourself?
 - Yes, - answers Mariya.
 - Oh you little bunny, - quietly smiles the punisher. His smile looks even more twisted because blood starts to flow out of his mouth. He wipes the blood with his hand and looks at it, then takes a step forward and somewhat clumsily descends into the grass.
 - Nemtsov, what've you got there? - yells the second punisher whom Mariya can't see behind the trunk, and without waiting for an answer he takes a burst at the bushes.

Mariya stands up and walks to the sunlight. There're quite many corpses all around and that girl who was rushing around the yard got hit after all. Here she lies, half-turned on her back, arm thrown backwards as if she wants to toss something, she looks upwards at the clouds, wind blows through her hair.

Punishers are already at the school walls. With her eyes Mariya finds the man who talked to Yulia, he seems to be in charge.

- Mister, wait, I know where they keep the hostages! - she shouts to him.

Ignat Ilyich turns his bare head. His eyes are squinted like those of a predator beast, his mighty neck surges with power that lives in his heavyweight rhinoceros croup.

- I'll show you the way, - repeats Mariya.
- Tell me where, you've no business going there.
- I want to go too, there's my little sister, - lies Mariya, trying to give Ignat Ilyich an honest glance right into his eyes.
- Tell me where, - barks Ignat Ilyich.
- In the basement, in the underground, - babbles Mariya, confusedly stretching down her arms like a doll. - But you won't be able to find it by yourself, I... I don't know how to explain.
- Alright let's go, - Ignat Ilyich turns to the school director who is standing behind the fence, Valentina Rodionovna. - Is there any basement entrance outside the school ground?
- No, - answers Valentina Rodionovna. Suddenly out of nowhere anger appears on her fat face.

Once upon a time Mariya has already visited the basement, about two years ago together with her friends they were playing hide-and-seek on a long school break and Nadya had the idea to hide in the basement, at that time the door was open, probably because of the plumbing maintenance.

She can vaguely remember that damp smell of the underworld and its darkness, that nagging fear of getting her shoes soiled in mud or ripping her new tights on a nail. Back then together with Nadya they hid not that far from the entrance, behind the dusty blackboards that were leaning against the wall, they hid themselves from all the humans, even a man in grey overall who was slowly passing by, coughing and smoking his pungent cigarette, couldn't spot them, although he pointed his flashlight right at the girls who were ditching behind the ribs of the huge wooden rectangles, but like a blind man he simply walked

past them, as a tiger that walks past furry and moist-eyed little hares, hidden under a snowy bush on a moonless February night. The school bell that rang that time was barely audible for them, and they couldn't figure out if maybe they merely imagined it, oh how terrifying and comforting it has been - sitting like that in the gloom, among the porous moisty walls with drops of some long-dead rain soaking through them, the water murmured gently inside the pipes, as if there would be a small river flowing there, deep in the underground, and the flowers, unknown to human eye, would grow on its banks, and the sorrowful butterflies and the tiny dragonflies would fly among them in patterns of the dying bonfire embers.

- Where? - hisses Ignat Ilyich in the darkness that is dropping in front of them like an elevator down an endless night shaft.

Punishers glide their flashlight beams all around, but the reality is irrevocably lost for them, it shattered into cumbersome shadows of the objects, concealed from the world, and now they can't put those shadows together anymore into stairs, hallways and rooms.

- Where? Point it - again hisses Ignat Ilyich and covers Mariya's mouth with his hand so she wouldn't talk but Mariya has nothing to say because she knows: nowhere. There is nothing nowhere anymore and never has been because the past itself recedes into oblivion when only the dead remain.

One of the punishers falls on his back as if mown down by a sickle, his AK clanks against the floor and the flashlight rolls on its concrete surface like

some fleeing little animal with a tale made of light, the second one squats down by the wall, throws back his head and opens his mouth, he lacks oxygen in this damp underground stuffiness, Ignat Ilyich shines in his face and inspects his wax-like tense features until the scarlet blood sprinkles out of punisher's nose and he falls to his side with a wheeze, dropping out from the light circle, he wants to die in the dark. Ignat Ilyich lets go Mariya's mouth, turns around and sees the third punisher already lying down on the stairs, gaze fixed to someplace upwards, hands gripping at the steps, then his head jerks up as if an invisible hand would punch him, his neck cracks and then again comes the blood, out of his nose, out of his mouth. Ignat Ilyich can't understand where the death came from but he is searching for it calmly, without panic, without even using his senses and relying only on the intuition of a wounded cattle. In a moment he already knows the answer.

Mariya turns around, their eyes meet, the girl looks at him with naive tenderness but Ignat Ilyich can see in her eyes that she wants to kill him.

But Mariya can not do it. Ignat Ilyich, the executioner that has seen so many pornographic movies of death, holds Mariya's gaze with his blunt rhinoceros face, only his eyes narrow and his legs thrust harder against the floor. Mariya jerks her chin upwards, quickly like a rat, again and again, she bites her lip and grabs at her dress, but Ignat Ilyich is still standing in front of her like a marble monument to herbivorous cattle, with a quiet snore he pulls in a long thread of air, slowly contemplating how to kill his little enemy. Mariya makes a pitiful grimace as if she is about to cry and

shuts her eyes with a moan from this stroke of impotence. Ignat Ilyich emits a guttural grunt and shoots her in the stomach with his pistol. A bullet blows Mariya off her feet, she falls down and shields herself with a hand from the pistol pointed at her, Ignat Ilyich puts the gun behind his belt and takes a knife from behind his boot.

He wants to slice the half-dead girl with a knife so that she screams, he knows how to do it to children, they only understand well the language of pain and after she dies out of horror and blood loss he'll cut up her angelic face.

But Ignat Ilyich doesn't manage to deal with Mariya. Something small and fast silently jumps on him from behind, from the stairs, and following this jump impact it sticks into the back of his head its sharp and cold death. He doesn't die on the spot, his military body is way too tough and mighty, a death machine sharpened by long years of satanic determination, non-stop butchery, Ignat Ilyich gasps and chokes on his blood, shakes off Yulia's light body and takes a few steps along the basement before dropping face forwards, forehead to the ground, he roars in agony, scrapes the solid dusty concrete with his boots, grins, roars again, rubs with his bare head against the floor and spits his dark blood into darkness.

It's difficult for Mariya to get up, she holds her shot belly and simply stands by the wall while Yulia picks up weapons and knocks out teeth of the dead ones with a pistol grip. After that both of them carry all the AKs upstairs. At that point Mariya feels nauseous, she vomits blood, sits down by the wall and orders to bring her a 1st grader. Gena

Pestov returns with a scared boy, who all the time tries to protect himself with his hands, afraid they would hit him. Mariya sees the boy and shuts her eyelids in exhaustion. The 1st grader barely manages to squeak when Gena grabs him by the hair and pulls his head back, meanwhile Olena Kronc leans to the boy with her belly and sticks an awl directly into the child's throat. Mariya puts her mouth to the boy's warm neck and sucks his still-living blood while keeping her eyes closed. She sucks and swallows with a quiet and thick slurp, the boy on his knees silently looks at the parquet, an open window is slowly knocking in the wind gusts, torn up cotton clouds up in the sky are constantly transforming. Like a crystal vase on a table, the sun focuses its rays and blinds the punishers that walk in a sparse column to storm the school.

It's Lida Popugaeva, a skinny blonde 2-grader who spots them out of the window, merely a single flickering shadow, but Lida yells and raises the alarm. The pack moves out to the sun-drenched hallway of the school where they've spent so many joyful long breaks, they bring the children out of the gym and drive them upstairs.

In the ceiling of the last fourth floor there is a blue rectangular door to the attic and the same-colored metal stairs that leads to it.

- Over there, - Mariya points at the blue rectangle. - Upstairs.

The door turns out to be locked so boys put the AK butts against the window sill and shatter the blue wood that blocks their way with roaring burst fire, a heart-rending shriek of horror sounds from above, pieces and splinters of the door drop to the floor,

huge holes corrode through the dissolving square like acid, and right at the moment when the deafening silence falls upon them, the pack snarls and rushes towards the skies, gripping at iron bars in frenzy.

- Tear to shreds! - yells Petya Perepelkin who climbs first and wries his horribly smashed face.
- Tear to shreds! - barks and howls Natasha Borovaya, viciously slamming her rasp against the metal like a mad ape.

One after the other they climb to the attic, some girl out of the students who were hiding there tries to squeeze through a narrow window to the roof, a few children huddle by the wall, ducking behind each other, meanwhile Volodya Popov leans against the dusty plaster and opens fire at them with his AK, terrible blows rip children's bodies apart as if they would be made out of paper, bullets breaks their bones and splatter around streams of their blood. The girl who got stuck in the window finally makes it through but drops dead the next second, one of her legs still sticking out to the attic, a plummy girl, probably another student of 6th "B", covers her ears, shuts her eyes and shrills, tapping her feet on the floor, for a while bullets have mercy on her but then the shrill cuts short, choked on a half-tone, and the girl slowly opens her eyes, tears her hands off the ears, understanding that all she can see and hear now is very important for her because she will never see or hear something ever again. The bullet has already hit her in the chest but death is not in the hurry and even Mariya, one of the last to climb the attic, can still observe her quiet agony, her pale face covered in morning dew, her grey eyes and pursed bloodless lips, her clenched fists. Mariya sees that

the girl will die soon so she kneels next to her, one can still hear short bursts from the rooftop but here in the attic things have already calmed down, dust is swirling in the sun rays, blood is gurgling in its streams that flow out of corpses around them.

- Tell me, - whispers Mariya while staring in the dreadful eyes of the dying girl, - Are you in pain?

The girl is in pain, there is nothing more inside her except for pain, she is in torment and her torment is more boundless than opened sky above the ceiling, her torment has long exceeded the chance to endure and the chance to scream in pain, and in her eyes Maria sees an unfamiliar light, an immense power that pierces everything like a shimmering blizzard, an abyss in which face she feels herself like a tiny grain of sand that got stuck to the wall of an empty glass, an abyss full of light that is deadly for her, how exactly it kills remains unclear, merely by its sheer presence, by its sheer existence and Mariya knows: she will inevitably find herself there, in that light that consumes the flesh, in that deadly purity, and she will die forever, forever, and this one in front of her, the one death still hasn't picked up, no matter what one does to her, she will live there, not here, but there, unsure how but she will live, because she is sort of an angel, such a strange name for her it is.

- You're already far away and me, I'm here, - whispers she to the girl's face. - I'm still alive, you won't beat me that simple. I'm still alive, you won't beat me that simple.

After those words she stands up and exits to the smooth black surface of the roof, takes out of her

pocket a piece of chalk and starts drawing a huge circle over her new soil. Inside the circle she draws a pentagram, the lines coming out from under her hand are even and precise, there is no boundlessness in them, they close on themselves exactly on required spots. Earth is shaking under her feet, punishers shatter the attic with their bullets, venting out their deadly rage, Mariya's companions fall one after the other. Vitya Gorky drops through the attic entry into a soft pile of shot up children, because they only managed to drag five of them to the roof, the rest had to be shot underneath the attic entry so they wouldn't return home and grow up, so their pure blood would become pure heavenly fire. Lida Golubkina keeps lying quietly on the concrete floor, a bullet hit her lung, she tries to breathe but drowns in blood inside of her, as if something there is tearing her apart like boiled chicken skin, it hurts but she doesn't cry, she is simply lying down and waiting for death to come. Misha Brusatkin stayed downstairs, he couldn't manage to climb the stair to the skies, bullets pierced his back like heavy summer fruits that dropped from an apple tree, they shattered his spine but he still keeps living when his body has already died, he can see the faces of his killers, they slowly move in from the concrete staircase, he can hear fierce screams of Natasha Borovaya, riddled with burst fire but still trying to lift herself up to the attic, she has already grabbed at the last iron bar when she finally got killed and she falls down like a rook, shot down from a slingshot, she heavily hits the floor with her long-haired head.

Volodya Popov brings the last prisoners from the further side of the rooftop, they were hiding behind

the brick pipe. Mariya reluctantly raises her head from her drawings and sees Antonina Romanovna clinging together with some fourth-grader and a crying girl in torn up school uniform, her mouth and dress on the chest are smeared in vomit, she rubs her swollen eyes with her pink-manicured hands and asks for mercy in a broken stuttering voice.

Mariya is consumed in her work and she almost doesn't care.

- Hello, Antonina Romanovna, - quietly says she. - I told you no more prisoners, - she addresses Volodya with a slight reproach. - Drop the boy and girl, cut Antonina Romanovna belly to chest open and hang her on the pipe so that her guts fall out.

Volodya, Nadya, Yulia and Petya jump on the prisoners that desperately try to defend themselves, Yulia kicks the girl in the stomach, she bends down and gets a knife to the side, Yulia grabs her by the hair and skillfully slices her throat, the girl tries to break free, bellows and sprays blood on black hardened roof tar, Antonina Romanovna receives a rasp blow to the head, they tear away the kicking screaming boy off her and Nadya drags him to the roof edge, but halfway through she suddenly staggers, falls down and rolls to the side, the boy breaks out of her grip and runs along the edge desperately waving his arms in the air, Volodya takes an aimed shot with his pistol and knocks him off his feet, the victim tumbles and curls up on the tar, writhing in pain.

- Sniper! - yells Lida Popugaeva, she drops on her stomach and starts crawling towards the attic. - In the next house!

Volodya and Petya pay her no attention and drag Antonina Romanovna's heavy body towards the pipe, they lift her up, take off her stockings and tighten her neck to the cables that hang from the pipe. Antonina Romanovna raises and chokes, eyes bulging she tries to tear off the noose with her hands, Petya rips apart clothes on her chest, slices open her twitching belly and helps with his hand for intestines to drop out. Boys are already running back, hunched over, when a muffled blast sounds somewhere inside the attic and clouds of white smoke jump out of its windows. Attic defenders cough and retreat, Lida Popugaeva shouts frantically for them to lay low but they can't hear her, wheezing out of gnawing pain in their throats, Kolya Egubov falls on the spot, hit by a sniper bullet, blinded Olya Korc crawls on all four to the side and only faithful Gena Pestov kneels down and opens blind fire into the smoke with his AK, a short burst out of the smoke throws Gena with his back on the tar and Gena screeches, jerks his legs and beats his head against the black firmament.

Mariya grabs one of the 1st grader girls and drags her over the completed pentagram to its center. The girl kicks, squeals and even manages to bite Mariya's arm till blood so she has to give her a strong punch on the head. Yulia runs next to her. Mariya turns around and sees the punishers crawling out from the smoke with their flat-eyed trunk-bearing heads, she sees Olya Korc coughing frantically, she lies down and clutches at her chest, she sees Petya and Volodya driving the rest of the children at the enemy, them both duck and hide themselves behind their numbers, right away the punishers readily open fire at the

children and bullets throw them all around, Petya rushes forward with a knife but doesn't make it and rolls away pierced by hits to his chest and stomach. Volodya crouches down and takes a burst over the heads of lying 1st graders, one of the punishers drops wounded to his leg, his bulletproof vest softens next bullet hits, meanwhile the second one is on the move, he takes single shots and blows out Volodya's brains, for a moment boy's body continues crouching with his head split open clasping at his AK, then he drops to the side like a pillow. The punisher who shot him falls on his stomach like an inanimate object and smashes his face against the roof. Two more punishers appear out of the smoke screen, one of them shoots through the legs of Lida Popugaeva who tried to run away and when she falls down he races to her, presses down screeching child's body and takes out a knife, his comrade goes limp and drops to the tar, blowing blood foam out of his mouth, Lida screams horribly while getting stabbed with a knife.

Mariya turns away and breaks off her deadly gaze, not interested in Lida's fate anymore, she carries the stunned 1st grader to the prized spot. Yulia clumsily grabs the girl by the hair and slices her throat.

Mariya takes a handful of child's blood, tosses it to the sky and whispers something that makes all the lines start to burn, the flame rises a few meters tall, but Mariya and Yulia don't feel it, it doesn't sting, blowing through their bodies like a light wind, and everything quiets down in its frenzied song, all the living and the dead, only clear white clouds stretch high above, they tear apart like wet

paper, so far away one can't hear them crackling and
the fiery ring of the sun freezes above them, it
finds the likeness in the wildly blazing circle
below, there burns the circled star, there burns the
empty school and there stand those two, amidst the
fire, and nobody can see them and will never be able
to see them again, only I can see them, me who is
hovering on the ascending air current, is it me who
is turning like a bird caught in the gust of may wind
or is it merely earth that is turning underneath?